

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

1
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki



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Prologue: The Old Guy Dies

Our story begins with *Swords & Sorceries VII*. An online VRRPG.

Boasting a fully immersive VR world, it had been popular since the groundbreaking DreamTech game console first launched.

The game was the seventh entry in its series, and it had a dedicated fan base that was continuing to grow. Its hook was that it could synchronize with a player's synapses via special equipment, stimulating their five senses in real life as they played. Since this offered a far more realistic experience than games on competing consoles, more and more people were drawn into the game and its world.

Sure, the equipment you needed was fairly expensive. But there was no end to the line of players looking for thrills in a realistic setting—and its vast world, promising all sorts of grand adventures, pulled them in.

Satoshi Osako was part of the game's dedicated fan base. Today, like any other day, he was out in that digital world as his character, Zelos Merlin, enjoying adventures alongside his party.

Zelos's eyes were hidden behind the bangs of his long, unkempt hair, and his face was covered in stubble. He was, in other words, the textbook definition of an average-looking middle-aged man. He was clad in top-rank gear, but it was all tied together with a plain design so as not to stand out.

What was more, he was a mage of medium build, wearing the sort of dirty gray robe you'd associate with shady types. Nobody would expect him to be one of the game's top five players.

Yet despite it all, he was one of the "Destroyers"—the best players in the world.

*

At its core, combat damage in *Swords & Sorceries* was determined by an individual's skills and level. But one of the game's flagship features was that

players could make not only their own equipment and items but also custom spells. Essentially, players could create these spells by putting together symbols that represented fifty-six letters and ten numerals, allowing them to conjure up all sorts of magical effects.

Known as a Spell Circuit, this technique let players etch sigils into their subconscious to modify their starter magic, changing its power and effects. But it had an unusual quirk: the more delicate and complex the spell became, the less its power increased, and the less mana it would consume.

On rare occasions, however, even an attack that should have zero attack power however you looked at it would come out unusually powerful. And so the players, of course, decided to come together for some research.

This phenomenon caused an uproar right around the game's launch, giving it a reputation as a crappy game for a period of time.

But before long, the players' desperate search for an answer revealed a hidden mechanic of sorts. They found that by using the character's own mana as a catalyst, it was possible to tap into the mana of the world itself and increase the ability's power.

What's more, it appeared that one could cast a spell in this manner using any magical formula, however clumsy or crude, so long as it met the requirements and could be used efficiently.

The problem was that things like the open world's mana weren't displayed as numbers. This left players scrambling to try and find just how much mana they needed to consume as a catalyst.

The uproar that had occurred at the game's launch had stemmed from players modifying their abilities at random without any hints. In other words, it was a matter of mere coincidence.

Ultimately, it was left up to the players to discover hints about this hidden mechanic out in the open world or in dungeons, and each player was free to choose whether they wanted to take that on as a challenge or simply ignore it.

As a game, *Swords & Sorceries* offered a tremendous amount of freedom. But the players who really got hooked on it were those who had a considerable

degree of real-world knowledge; most of the player base was content to simply use the existing spells as is. Creating spells took quite a long time, and many felt that just going out and exploring the world was a more enjoyable use of their time.

Still, improved spells could potentially have their cooldown and cast time reduced to zero—an advantage that left other players increasingly unhappy about the gap in power.

But Satoshi had gotten hooked, hard. Whatever those other players thought meant nothing to him.

Satoshi's party let each of its members enjoy the game however they pleased, and they weren't the type to turn their custom spells into "spell scrolls" to sell to other players. This had gotten them flamed online, met with crowds of players who were angry at them for not making their powerful spells public. But Satoshi and the others paid no heed to the abuse; if anything, they were thrilled to blow off the expectations of others. They simply went about their own way, developing all sorts of spells as they wished without caring about the eyes of others.

The game had been out for some seven years by now, but the top player rankings were invariably dominated by Satoshi and his party. You could say they were addicted.

Their magic had become abnormally complex, and the inscrutable system that made it all possible continued to be met with disapproval from those who were playing to beat the game. But at its core, the system was set up so that tips about spell creation could be found easily enough by searching the open world or the cities that served as bases.

As Satoshi and his party were fond of saying: "Don't expect someone else to do the hard work for you!"

Satoshi had once made quite the name for himself as a programmer at a top-tier company. But for whatever reason, he had been laid off from his job, and he now lived a solitary life out in the countryside.

Each day he'd take care of the fields, then game obsessively. He was, to put it bluntly, not far off being a shut-in.

In his fictional world, he was a “Great Sage,” wielding power vast enough to make anyone envious. And the allure of this only made Satoshi more and more obsessed with the game. He was still a bachelor at the age of forty, and his only real family to speak of was an older sister. For him, this virtual world was a place to be at ease—one where he could simply be himself.

He probably would have been popular once, if only he had put some effort into his looks. But his laid-back approach to life had seen him slip past the prime age for marriage.

Satoshi—armed as he was with knowledge from his old career—played an important role in his party’s creation of powerful spells, but the other members were no slouches. They each boasted skills of their own that would inevitably bring about even more fiendish spells. The whole party was made up of single-minded research fanatics, and they took great pride in their skills.

Just for fun, they had kept up their efforts to make even higher-power, more mana-efficient spells, and cleared all sorts of difficult quests. And now, Satoshi was standing alongside his companions in the game’s story mode, fighting what was thought to be the game’s final boss—the Dark God.

*

Nobody knew how long the fight had been going on, but one thing was clear: the party seemed to be on the verge of defeating the Dark God for good.

Upon reaching its third phase, the Dark God had cast an imposing figure. But now, the efforts of the five-man party had reduced it to a pitiful state.

While all five were mages, they were equipped with a treasure trove of weapons they had made themselves. They had been using them to bring forth tremendous waves of brutal firepower and mayhem, overwhelming the Dark God from start to finish.

“Damn, you’re a stubborn one. Can you just hurry up and die already?!”



“It’s the last boss! Of course it’s going to be tough!”

“Ooh, winding up for an attack, are you? Guess I’ll put up my magic defense!”

The Dark God’s powerful magic attack came surging toward Satoshi and his party, looking as if it were tearing up the world itself.

But despite its force, they’d blocked the attack with a network of magical barriers. That created an opening—an opening that the party could use. Brandishing their weapons, they rushed in for a joint assault.

The god’s arm was sliced right off, and fell to the floor to the sound of almighty roar.

That the party had managed to pull off this sort of feat despite all being mages was thanks to the spells and equipment they had made together. In freely devoting themselves to whatever sort of ultimate gear, magic, and items took their fancy, the party members had casually tested all sorts of things against enemy monsters.

This was not the first time the party had tried to bring down the Dark God. But their many previous attempts had ended in utter defeat—and now, they were out for revenge.

“All righty! Should we go in for the finish? I’ve gotta get to my part-time job soon.”

“Yeah! Go murder that bastard!”

“I’ll back you up. You’d better appreciate it, okay?”

“I wonder what kind of rare drops we’ll get? I can’t wait to see!”

“Okay, then—how about we make some sort of cool pose together? It’s the last boss, after all. What kind of top players would we be if we didn’t show off here?”

The players all had bold grins plastered across their faces. And all at once, they sent out magical attacks of immense power that cascaded over the Dark God, forcing its health to plummet toward zero.

The magic from the oddball band of mischief-makers—ridiculously excessive,

terribly overpowered magic—hurtled ruthlessly toward the Dark God. It was almost enough to make you feel bad for the poor thing.

Bathed in countless explosions, the Dark God was in its pitiful final moments, slinking down from the sky to the ground in defeat.

“Well, that’s the end of that. Just what you’d expect from the last boss fight...that was *tough!*”

“So, what now? I’ll have to pass on any celebrations, though. I’m just about to fall asleep...”

“Yeah, I’ve got work now, so it’s a no from me too. I’ll be logging off in just a sec.”

“Same here. Sorry, guys. I’ll make up for it next time, though.”

“All right, I guess we’re calling it for today, then. I’m off to work. Niiight~!”

A chorus of “Niiight~!” echoed back from the rest of the party.

With his party members teleporting out and logging off one after another, Satoshi was left alone in the Dark God’s castle, having decided to stay and look through the loot he’d received.

And it was this decision that set everything in motion.

Oblivious to the slight twitch in the Dark God’s body in front of him, Satoshi continued to scan through his status screen, looking over his level-ups and the points he’d earned as he thought about what skill to acquire next. Then all of a sudden, the corpse of the Dark God began to move before his eyes.

Cloaked in an ominous haze, the god gazed straight at the foe in front of it, eyes burning with hatred.

“You cretins dare to overthrow me? Unacceptable!”

“Wh—?! No way! I’m sure I saw that health bar hit zero...!”

“A curse upon the meddling goddesses who sealed me! A curse upon the ignorant cretins who opposed me! You will all fall together!”

“You’re kidding... The event’s not over yet?! I swear it was—”

The Dark God let loose a wave of cursed energy, striking with the full force of

its fury.

*

That day, the entirety of Japan experienced a power outage.

In the midst of the chaos, dozens throughout the country were found dead of unknown causes.

Nevertheless, with all efforts going toward restoring the nation's power grid, those that died were almost completely forgotten about in the frenzy. They were relegated to merely a short article in the corner of a newspaper page, and that was it—lost to the waves of time.

Chapter 1: The Old Guy Reincarnates in Another World

Satoshi awoke in a lush green forest.

He took a look around him, trying to figure out how he'd ended up here. Yet he still didn't see the slightest of clues.

Confused, he continued to scan his surroundings. But wherever he looked, it was trees, trees, trees—and some of them were like none he'd ever seen before.

"I swear I was just gaming in my room. What's *this* place meant to be?"

Craw! Craaaaaw!

A bird flew through the sky above, its feathers colored in psychedelic hues. Satoshi was speechless. He was getting more and more confused; this clearly wasn't any kind of animal from Earth.

In fact, it was beginning to seem quite likely that Satoshi was no longer *on* Earth. But all he could tell was that he'd suddenly found himself in a dense jungle, and that there were two moons floating in the sky above. You couldn't've blamed him for being at a loss for words.

"At the very least, this can't be Japan. What the hell is going on here? There are all these weird plants around—I mean, I've never even seen *pictures* of anything like them..."

Not far ahead, Satoshi could see a plant that looked like a cross between a rafflesia and a pitcher plant. It had caught some kind of wolflike creature using something that resembled ivy, and it was drawing the poor creature closer and closer to the middle of a gigantic flower. Then came a *crunch*—the sound of bones being shattered—as the creature was devoured.

If nothing else, Satoshi thought, Earth didn't have any plants as dangerous as that. Let alone *carnivorous* plants that stood more than two meters tall. And he

could barely believe his eyes as he looked closer: fangs protruded from the middle of the flower, gnashing down on the prey as it squirmed about in its grisly death throes.

It was then that Satoshi was distracted by an unusual sensation on his hips. He looked down as quickly as he could to check—and came to a realization. In truth, it had already been dawning on him, bit by bit; it was just that his sense of reason had refused to listen. But now, seeing *those*, he could only fall silent once again.

Hung from Satoshi's hips were two weapons. Both were rather plain, lacking in decoration; they were clearly meant for combat. The kicker, however, was that they appeared identical to the weapons that he had become so familiar with in *Swords & Sorceries*. His two trusty swords.

Both were rapiers, or shortswords, and each was light enough to be held in a single hand. Their sharp blades had been forged by Satoshi himself; he had been a prolific crafter in-game. What was more, both blades incorporated an ample amount of rare materials, making each a powerful weapon hanging from his waist.

Even before he'd seen these weapons, Satoshi had noticed that the area around him looked like something from the world of *Swords & Sorceries*. His meager common sense, however, had refused to accept it.

It was all too absurd. And yet, as he continued to examine himself, he noticed a dirty gray robe—again, the very same one that his character had been wearing. As much as he tried to deny it, the reality of his situation was flaunting itself before his very eyes.

Of course, while Satoshi's outfit *looked* like nothing more than a dirty gray robe, it was actually a piece of gear that offered excellent defense, having been made using materials dropped by a behemoth—a type of raid monster in the game. He was also clad in leather armor, and that, too, had been made from behemoth loot.

"Hah. Ha ha ha... There's no way. This is crazy. Have I really been transported into the world of a game? What is this, the setup to some cliché light novel?"

All Satoshi could do was laugh. However much he tried to deny it, he could

already see what had happened.

And yet, what little sense of reason he had was trying desperately to say otherwise. Part of him still longed to believe it was all just a dream, an apparition.

“‘Open status screen.’ Heh, just kidding...”

The words came out without much thought, Satoshi wishing for it to all be some kind of joke. But his wish went unheard—and a status screen popped up before his eyes, looking just like the one he had seen so many times in-game. He just about fainted from the shock.

“No way. This...” He trailed off for a moment, lost for words. “This is a joke, right? I can’t believe it. Someone’s gotta be pranking me, or—no. No, you wouldn’t be able to make something this big for a prank, would you? Seriously, what’s even happening to me right now?!”

*

Zelos Merlin (Level 1,879)

HP: 87,594,503 / 87,594,503

MP: 17,932,458 / 17,932,458

Job: Great Sage

Job skills:

Divine Mage (Max), Divine Alchemist (Max), Divine Blacksmith (Max), Divine Apothecary (Max), Divine Magicrafter (Max), Divine Swordsman (Max), Divine Spearman (Max), Divine Brawler (Max), Divine Hunter (Max), Divine Assassin (Max), Cooking (85 100), *Agriculture* (56 100), Dairy Farming (24 / 100)

Personal skills:

All-Status Resistance (Max), AllElement Aptitude (Max), Elemental Resistance (Max), Physical Enhancement (Max),

Enhanced Defense (Max), Enhanced Magic (Max), Mana Control (Max), Pinnacle of Magic (Max), Ultimate Martial Arts (Max), Expert Crafting (Max), Appraisal (Max), Clairvoyance (Max), True Sight (Max), Night Vision (Max), Covert Action (Max), Scouting (Max), Vigilance (Max), Find Minerals (Max), Find Plants (Max), Detect Presence (Max), Hide Presence (Max), Detect Mana (Max), Creation Aid (Max), Dismantling Aid (Max), Modification Aid (Max), Automatic Translation (Max), Automatic Deciphering (Max), Automatic Note-Taking (Max), Monster Encyclopedia (Max), Material Encyclopedia (Max), Limit Breaker (Max), Criticality Breaker (Max), Zenith Breaker (Max)

Individual skills:

Merlin's Grimoire (Max), Item Recipes (Max), Hyperspace Storage (Max)

*

"I mean, this is..." Satoshi paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "This is way beyond what a human should be able to do, right? Everything here is crazy. Wouldn't this make me some kind of superhuman? Jeez..."

They clearly weren't the kind of abilities a human should have.

Satoshi didn't know what was considered normal in this world. But even then, he was confident that this was about as far from normal as you could possibly get.

These were his abilities from the game, after all. And his character had been unparalleled, inventing spells on par with those of the Dark God.

Satoshi continued to fiddle with his status screen, staring with a face that looked like a ghost's.

"Huh. What's this? A message? Hmm. The sender is— Wait, 'unknown'? I don't like the sounds of that."

Red text flashed in the command menu under the status screen, telling

Satoshi he had a new message. Finger trembling, he reached out to open it.

“Okay, let’s see. Hang on—a *goddess*?!”

Satoshi stared in disbelief at the message’s subject line: *Cute goddess here to tell you what’s going on* ≡

Even just the start of the message gave him a bad premonition. That heart symbol did a spectacular job of destroying any credibility the sender could’ve had, and Satoshi immediately had his doubts, wondering whether he’d gotten caught up in some sort of further trouble.

Still, with no real clues about what had happened to him, Satoshi had to read the message, whether he wanted to or not. He reluctantly reached out and tapped the “Open” command.

Hey there~♪ Nice to meet you! I’m Flaress. I’m, like, a goddess. Bow down before me! Heed my call! Hehe. ≡

Satoshi had only just started reading, and already he felt a wave of exhaustion and regret sweep over him.

“I should probably just delete this, right? This seems so fishy I’d be able to smell it from a mile away. Whatever they’re up to, I don’t want anything to do with it...”

He got the feeling that whatever was going on, it’d be a bit of a pain in the ass. No, scratch that—a *big* pain in the ass.

Not to mention that this goddess’s grating energy was making things a lot worse for a man whose mind was already a mess. Frankly, it was the last thing he wanted right now.

I don’t have much time, so lemme get to the point. Okay, so 2,487 years ago, we teamed up with the heroes to seal away the Dark God, right? And you know what’s funny? We ended up sealing it inside a game in your world!

I mean, we sacrificed a whole bunch of stuff to seal it away in this world at first, but then it seemed like it was about to revive, so we had to lock it back up somewhere else, right? Anyways, it turned into a whole big thing! People even ended up calling it the “Dark God War” and stuff, ah ha ha! ≡

Satoshi's hunch had been right; this message really was a waste of time. He had his opinions about it all, but decided to bottle them up for now and keep reading.

Now, I know what you're probably thinking. I bet you're mad about us using your world as some sort of dump for our own trash, right? And, I mean, I get you. I do. But it's about the best we could do, you know? Plus, like, here's the thing. We thought, Hey, if we put it inside a game, then even you guys would be able to beat it, yeah? And then—you did! Thanks! That thing was a real pain in the butt, you know? Hard to believe something so ugly used to be a goddess!

Satoshi was stunned. “That thing was a goddess too? It just looked like some disgusting lump of guts. Are you serious?”

He remembered it as a bewildering cryptid of sorts, a mess that seemed like it had been made by melting together the grossest parts of other creatures. It looked as if innards had been squashed together into a huge mass and then made a hundred times more repulsive. An unidentifiable, nigh indescribable entity.

Even as he thought back on it now, the only word that seemed apt was “disgusting.” He found it impossible to believe that it had ever been any kind of goddess.

Really, though... There's no way I could've expected it to drag you all in and self-destruct, right? I'll be honest, that totes scared me!

Soooo, well, we figured, let's take the dozens of people it killed and bring them back to life in this world. “We” being me and the three other goddesses, by the way! ☆ (Yay!) And, like, we even based it all on your data from the game! ≡

“Hang on, do those ‘dozens of people’ include me? You’re saying I was *killed*?! And—” Satoshi fell silent for a moment. “Just how many victims *were* there? This sounds terrible...”

All those people had been completely contaminated by the equivalent of industrial waste. Killed by it.

You beat the Dark God for us, so as a special gift, okay, we've let you reincarnate with all the stuff you had in the game! ≡ The game you were

playing is pretty similar to this world, so it looks like it went pretty easily, hey? Well, you're probably unbeatable, so you can go do whatever you want now! Good job, us! Not that we're the ones who actually did the reincarnation, mind you...

Satoshi was furious. "I want to *pulverize* her. Not only did she make people playing a game clean up her industrial waste, she doesn't seem sorry about it in the slightest! This asshole. I want to beat her up and watch her cry..."

His feelings were understandable. He'd just been sitting there having fun in a game, only to have his entire life ripped away because of some goddess's arbitrary plans.

All the people who had been sacrificed must have had their own dreams. Plans. Futures. Lives. Yet they'd had someone else's burdens pushed onto them for reasons that barely made sense—and they'd died as a result. Satoshi absolutely refused to accept it.

Your inventory, your equipment—it's all been remade for you with stuff from this world! So go out there and get 'em! ≡

Oh, but make your own consumables, okay? The recipes for how to make them should've been installed into your heads, so take your time to check through it all. By the way, your age is the same as whatever it was in your old world, so if you want to be younger, you'll have to make an item for it yourself, all right? Sorry 'bout that!

You know, you wouldn't believe all the complaints we got from the gods in charge of your world. But hey, there's only so much we could do! About our only option was to reincarnate you! Well, we're short on hands, so we did get those guys to help us with that. Reviving the dead goes against the laws of nature, blah blah blah, you know how it is. It's tough stuff. Whatever. It's the gods from your world that had to deal with that. Anyway, that's how it is, so go enjoy the rest of your life in this world, 'kay? ≡ Well, see you round! Bye-bye~!

"There's only so much we could do? What a shitty excuse for a goddess! Is she not even gonna clean up the mess she's made? I just have my life taken away from me, get tossed over here, and get told to go have fun? What the fuck?!"

While the message had explained some of the reasons behind things, it didn't make his situation any better in the slightest. He still didn't even know where he was, after all, just that he was standing in a forest somewhere.

What was more, the goddess's overly casual attitude had pushed him beyond anger and into the realm of bloodlust.

"Well. I guess I've got a grasp of the general situation, at least. So the next question is whether there's anywhere nearby that has people living in it. But it really does look like I'm right in the middle of an untouched forest, huh..."

As long as he had no clue as to where he was, it was dangerous to just go in a random direction. The fact that this resembled the world from the game made it highly likely that monsters could be lurking in the shadows, after all.

After some thought, Satoshi decided his best bet for now would be to find some sort of high point and get a better view of his surroundings.

"It'd be nice if I could use Shadowraven's Wings here..."

Shadowraven's Wings was a flight spell that Satoshi had made for himself in-game. It was a first-rate creation. It had been designed to improve the poor efficiency of the baseline flight magic it had been built on; it used an enormous magic formula to keep mana consumption as low as possible.

Those in the world of *Swords & Sorceries* were able to take magic formulas created with mana and store them within their subconscious. Storing basic magic formulas in part of their brains like this allowed people to use various spells more easily by essentially installing them in advance. But if one used the right sigil, they could also extract any formulas they had memorized and improve them. And if the information Satoshi had been given was correct, he figured that the magic he had customized in this way should be available to him in this world as well.

Sigils appeared, floating above Satoshi's head and at his feet, each resembling an eight-pointed star made by overlaying two quadrilaterals. The sigils then began to resonate, forming an even more complex design.

The result was a sigil resembling a distorted sefirot diagram. It wrapped its way around Satoshi, generating a force field that released him—or, in a sense,

Zelos—from the chains of gravity.

“Huh? Whoa! This is amazing. I’m flying! I’m actually flying!!!”

There floated a forty-year-old man, giddy like a child. He was delighted to see his own custom magic from the game coming to life before his eyes.

Satoshi’s excitement was cut short as he remembered his objective: he needed to survey his surroundings from the sky. Yet the higher he rose, the more he was dismayed by the sight.

“It’s just more forest as far as I can see! Where’s the town? Is it just my imagination, or is this goddess *trying* to screw me over?”

There was nothing but untouched forest, stretching out to the horizon, and vast mountains. It wasn’t the kind of place that people would be living.

Despite his best attempts to spot a town or village, Satoshi failed to see anything of the sort. His prayers went unanswered.

“This...” He sighed. “This all must have been set up specifically to give me trouble, huh?”

Grumbling as he went, Satoshi picked a direction that interested him and kept flying.

From afar, he might have resembled a lost migratory bird, flying aimlessly through the sky.

*

So began a tiring cycle: Satoshi would land quietly before the mana for his flight spell ran out, only to deploy a new sigil and return to the skies to keep flying. Hours passed, and there was still no sign of any town or village.

That being the case, he needed to start thinking about getting himself some food and finding a place to sleep.

It was the simplest of needs; even the most powerful man couldn’t survive without food. If Satoshi wasn’t careful, he could easily end up starving to death.

Then there was sleep—also essential. He was, effectively, stranded in a survival situation.

“Sure, but...” He sighed, pausing for a moment. “What to do?”

Flaress’s message had said that his materials from the game had been remade for him in this new world, but a check of his inventory revealed not even the tiniest scrap of food. In *Swords & Sorceries*, Satoshi had always made sure to stock up on food before heading out on adventures with his party. Now, however, he felt like he’d been thrown right into the deep end of a real-life survival situation.

One positive was that his seasonings, at least, seemed to be there. But still, he’d need some proper ingredients to actually add them to.

“I guess I’ll have to hunt, huh? But are edible animals even a thing in this world?”

As he said that, Satoshi took a bow out of his inventory and hung a quiver over his shoulder.

The plan was to target some kind of small animal. But this is where Satoshi noticed a rather significant problem.

“Now that I think about it, I’ve never actually hunted by myself before. I used to go pretty often with Mr. Yamada, since he lived nearby...but can I actually butcher a dead animal by myself?”

Satoshi had lived in the remote countryside, in a mountain town with a view of the Seto Inland Sea. This rural lifestyle had made him reasonably good at getting along with his neighbors. He remembered helping hunt down boars that were damaging crops and preparing meat as hunters showed him how. But he’d only been able to do all of that with the help of the hunters by his side, giving him detailed instructions.

What that meant was that this was Satoshi’s first time hunting solo—yet if he failed, he’d wind up with an empty stomach and ultimately starve to death in the middle of a forest teeming with monsters. Left with no choice, he decided to activate his skills, just as he was used to doing in his online game. He erased his presence and looked for prey.

Satoshi was surprised at just how easily he managed to activate his skills. But he didn’t have time to dwell on it; the more pressing matter was to find himself

some food.

“There we go...”

Satoshi had spotted a rabbit, poking its face out from a patch of tall grass as it munched on greenery. Alert—but vulnerable.

*

Forest Rabbit (Level 300)

HP: 2,321 / 2,321

MP: 514 / 514

*

Rabbits were highly cautious. They had a habit of running away if they heard even the slightest noise.

That wasn't their only frustrating habit; they also tended to eat their own feces. But Satoshi, who needed nothing but the creature's meat, didn't particularly care about the contents of its stomach.

Satoshi nocked an arrow and took aim from atop a tree. There he stayed for a few minutes, holding his breath. Waiting. And then it was time: the forest rabbit showed itself, and Satoshi let the arrow fly loose from his bow.

THKROOOOOM!

A thunderous boom echoed out, the projectile blowing up rabbit and earth alike with such power that one could scarcely believe it had come from a bow.

“Too much power, huh? Maybe I used the wrong arrow. Still, that was a pretty high-level rabbit...”

The poor rabbit had been turned into nothing but pitiful-looking chunks of flesh. Satoshi's weapon of choice had been too powerful.

He glared at his bow, eyes unblinking.

*

Enchanted Bow Mk. 321

Attack Power: +100,000

Enhanced Strength, Double Power, Increased Attack Power
Improved Accuracy, One-Hit Kill, Explode Target

*

“I’ve killed it for nothing...”

This wasn’t the kind of weapon you should use for hunting. Satoshi had made this bow with his friends, half as a joke—but using it now, it seemed less like a bow and more like a high-tech military weapon. He hadn’t expected it to be quite so impractical.

There was no point worrying about how to butcher the body if his prey was exploding before it even got to that stage. At this rate, he’d never get any food.

“Okay, calm down. I’m sure I had a combat skill called Hold Back. If I use that, I should be able to make something work...”

One-Hit Kill had caused the prey to die, while Explode Target had broken it apart into tiny pieces. But if Satoshi used the Hold Back skill, he reasoned, he should be able to bring the next rabbit to the brink of death before finishing it off with a knife. With that thought in mind, Satoshi set out in search of his next prey.

“This time, for sure...”

Satoshi found another rabbit, carefully let loose an arrow, and managed this time to bring it to the brink of death. He swiftly equipped his knife and dealt the finishing blow.

The knife did more than just finish off the rabbit. If Satoshi’s goal had been to drain its blood, he had certainly succeeded. Still, he’d managed to get this far without any explosions this time. He could finally breathe again. All that was left now was the question of where to butcher it.

“I’d like to find some water.”

After promptly picking off another three rabbits, Satoshi went wandering around the forest in search of some running water. He was hungry, but it wasn’t time for that just yet.

After all, there was no guarantee that he’d be safe from other carnivores

trying to attack him, drawn in by the scent of blood.

Gyah! Gigyah! Gigyahgyah!

And just like that, one of the staples of any fantasy world had appeared—the king of all low-level monsters. The creature that never came alone, almost guaranteeing that any one would be followed by a hundred more close behind. That good old reliable monster whose name began with the letter G.

Having sighted Satoshi, the goblin blew its whistle almost as if it were a policeman from some old period drama. As it did, the forest started to stir with noise—and out came countless goblins, gushing forth like a torrent, one after another, their numbers continuing to swell.

“Goblins?! You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

Satoshi panicked and broke into a run.

Hunting some rabbits was all well and good, but Satoshi didn’t feel ready to fight against any humanoid creatures just yet.

It wasn’t as if he couldn’t win. Rather, he was held back by the morals of a man who had grown up in modern society. He felt a sense of revulsion toward an act that didn’t seem too far from murder. Satoshi still hadn’t steeled his resolve to live in this harsh new environment.

He knew he was being naive. Nonetheless, it was something he’d need some time to get over.

Satoshi ran as fast as he could, the pack of goblins close on his heels.

“Wh-What the hell is wrong with this plaaaaaace?!”

There was seemingly no end to the horde of goblins. Satoshi didn’t know it yet, but this vast forest was yet to be explored even by the denizens of this world, who referred to it in fearful tones as the Far-Flung Green Depths.

It was the kingdom of the wilderness—home to all sorts of monsters, including a number that were yet to be discovered.

Herds far larger than a thousand monsters were in no short supply here. If anything, this goblin herd was fairly commonplace by the forest’s standards.

Satoshi thought about trying to escape with flight magic, but there were countless arrows buzzing through the air from all around him; he wouldn't have a chance to get up into the sky. It was oppression through sheer numbers. Yet trapped as he was, the desperately fleeing Satoshi saw the tiniest flicker of something that looked like light in the distance ahead.

Like a moth drawn to the flame, he headed toward it by instinct.

A village came into sight ahead of him. No—going by its size, it would even have been reasonable to call it a proper town.

“I-I’m saved— *Gah!*”

It didn't take Satoshi long to realize that he had been mistaken. What lay ahead was indeed a town—but lurking within it was a full goblin army. The place he had been heading toward was a *goblin* settlement.

He had ultimately done nothing but plunge himself farther into enemy territory. At this point, he could only laugh.

“Hah. Aha ha ha ha... Haaaa ha ha ha ha!”

Satoshi was cornered in more ways than one, and his mind was on the brink of collapse.

Gigyah! Gyogyahgyahgyah!

Goblins were omnivorous creatures, devouring anything they could get their hands on. In the forest's harsh environment, humans were just another source of protein for the local wildlife, including them. And for the goblins, who'd been out hunting for the day, finding Satoshi held the promise of a good meal.

But the goblins had yet to realize...

They'd chosen the wrong man to go after.

“Destroy them all!”

All of a sudden, a tempest of mana devastated the area, its fury leaving the monsters trembling in fear.

But it was already too late for them. Satoshi was beginning to unleash a forbidden spell.

“Dark Judgment!”

A huge, jet-black orb began to form out of the vast surge of mana. From there spawned more orbs—smaller, but of the same color—which fanned out to swallow up the goblins without mercy.

Tendrils of lightning licked the air; whirlwinds formed, as if a great storm had befallen the land. The black orbs swallowed up every last goblin and the very ground they stood on, leaving explosions as they disappeared. It was a one-sided massacre, a rush of sheer destruction.

This was the worst of magics—a spell that had been created after countless battles with the Dark God, by those who had studied its attacks with scientific rigor and used them as its foundation.

Amid the slaughter, the goblin settlement was destroyed in the blink of an eye. And yet, as if to say that this still wasn’t enough—that it needed more, *more* destruction—the spell sent out aftershocks that turned vast swathes of the forest into naught but empty land.

Dark Judgment was a spell that manipulated supergravity, randomly spitting out black holes that stopped just short of going critical. Compressing the goblins down to a quantum level, it allowed the user to unleash destructive attacks on a wide area without the need for gunpowder.

What was more, it only grew stronger the more enemies there were, and its rampage would continue until every last one was gone without a trace.

It truly was the magic of nightmares.

The scenery that awaited Satoshi as he came back to his senses was a field of huge craters that looked as if they’d been formed by falling meteorites. The ground was so pockmarked that it resembled the surface of the moon, with countless craters of all sizes etched into the dirt.

Satoshi took a moment to collect himself. “I’ve made a mistake. There’s no going back from this. I’ve just flat-out destroyed nature, not to mention everything I killed...” He paused again. “I’ve caused more damage than a nuclear explosion.”

While he had fired it off in self-defense, his magic had left unimaginable scars

on the land.

All that remained after this wanton destruction were a scattering of magic stones, which had dropped from the defeated goblins.

While their physical bodies had been annihilated, the magic stones that remained were crystallized magic, tougher than diamonds. So despite the might of Satoshi's annihilation spell, these stones had endured.

Though some had been smashed in the process, Satoshi still managed to collect more magic stones than he could have needed. He was left with a question, though:

"Everything around me was crushed down to the quantum level. How did the stones survive?" He sighed. "Well, whatever. Let's get back to the water."

Satoshi had learned two things. First, that there were still laws of nature out there that he did not understand. And second, that he wielded the power of what were effectively senseless weapons of mass destruction, making his very existence a threat to peace itself. These thoughts hanging in his mind, Satoshi's footsteps became heavy, like those of the dead.

Three hours after he'd collected the fallen magic stones and returned to his exhausting hike through the forest, Satoshi came across a river. Flowing through it was perfectly clear spring water; he could even see fish swimming along.

"Butchering, huh? How should I go about this? Mr. Yamada only taught me the basics, after all..."

Unable to endure his hunger, however, Satoshi got to work on butchering his prey from earlier, right next to the river.

The knife that he'd used for butchering in the game had been recreated in this new world. And fortunately, what real-life experience he did have with hunting had at least taught him the basics of butchering meat. Still, it was his first time doing it alone. And on top of that, he'd need to go about it in the wild, leaving him unsure of when monsters could attack.

But if he just sat here doing nothing, it was liable to happen again anyway.

He steeled his heart and decided to begin. It was then, however, that an astonishing sight appeared before his eyes.

“Wait. When did I butcher this?! I don’t even remember starting...”

Somehow, the body of the first forest rabbit had been neatly cut up into sections of meat without Satoshi even noticing. What was more, the fur had been removed without getting stained by even a single drop of blood. Something was clearly unusual here, and Satoshi was bewildered.

“It is what it is. Well, now for the next o— Huh?!”

The instant Satoshi pulled out the body of the next forest rabbit, his arms moved—as if subconsciously—to butcher it into a delicious-looking pile of meat. And they did so with an almost frightening level of speed and precision.

Even seeing it himself, Satoshi was astonished.

“Hang on. Is this something to do with my job skills?”

His skills included Divine Hunter and Dismantling Aid, both of which provided a considerable boost to the user’s hunting abilities. Job skills in *Swords & Sorceries* were divided into five levels, starting with Apprentice or unadorned job titles and then going up to Master, Elite, Imperial, and eventually Divine. For example, if someone were to become a Swordsman, they would need to improve their Swordsmanship skill rank by rank to Master Swordsman, Elite Swordsman, and so on. While some jobs had their own ways of naming each rank, this was generally how it went.

What was more, a user could then supplement these job skills with their own personal skills to significantly improve their abilities.

Leveling up your job skills made them much better at boosting your performance in that job—and all of Satoshi’s job skills were at the Divine rank. He’d already maxed out most of his skills, making his abilities far beyond the realm of your regular expert.

The result of it all was that his butchering—incredibly accurate, and done at miraculous speed—was that of an artisan so advanced that it would be nigh impossible for anyone else to even come close.

“This just seems superhuman, at this point. Am I going to need to hide away somewhere and live a quiet life? From the perspective of a normal human, this kind of thing must look insane...”

Satoshi had reached abnormally high skill levels across the board, even in skills that were hard to level up without a lot of grinding. That’s just how much he’d been hooked on *Swords & Sorceries*. But seeing it in front of him now, as clear reality, was a different story.

He could already tell that if some country got their eyes on him, he’d end up in a bigger mess than he already was.

“I really want to avoid getting caught up in any trouble. And if I can, I’d like to get married...” Satoshi sighed. “Would that even be possible for a monster like me?” Another sigh, deeper this time.

For Satoshi, who’d remained single all these years, both were equally serious problems.

At the very least, he had enough ingredients sitting around to make a secret concoction for reversing age. Still, he wouldn’t have the opportunity to actually make one in his current situation.

And there was also the little problem of him not having any of this world’s money.

“Well, at least it helps that money here works pretty much the same as the yen...”

Looking through the knowledge that had been retrofitted into his brain, Satoshi found that one gol was equal to one yen. It then went up in denominations of five gol, ten gol, fifty gol, one hundred gol, five hundred gol, and so on.

While it all took the form of gold coins, each coin’s value was determined by its size. If you reached the level of ten million gol, you were in the realm of full-on gold bars, and so it was common in this world to have alchemists working frantically to transmute gold.

Unlike on Earth, gold was relatively cheap to procure here. But it was only later on that Satoshi would come to learn that.

As darkness fell over the forest and the curtain rose on a night ruled by nocturnal animals, Satoshi sat there alone, grilling his rabbit meat on an open-air fire. He was the perfect image of a lonely middle-aged man, lost in thought.

Yet in spite of that, he was managing to keep his mind off the loneliness.

“Going off what I’ve read in light novels, I’m going to guess that lives aren’t worth much in this world. Could I kill a bandit if one popped out in front of me? Ugh, all these problems are giving me a headache. Still, I should probably be prepared, just in case...”

If Satoshi were to assume that this new reality was set up like a light novel or a game from his old world, he could probably expect to find a lot of nations clustered close together. And it seemed likely that his treatment would differ significantly depending on which one he ended up in.

Perhaps in one country, mages were looked upon with scorn, while in another it was demi-humans who were subject to discrimination. Another still could see him conscripted into the army by a power looking to strengthen its military might.

If Satoshi hesitated against criminals, he’d probably have a tough time living from here on out. Most likely, there were going to be times when he’d need to make a hard decision. Yet if he wanted to minimize the threats to his life, even a little, he’d want to avoid standing out.



“Well, there’s no point thinking about it too much right now. Let’s just eat. Who knows when I might be attacked by monsters, after all...”

Saying this, Satoshi brought the grilled rabbit meat to his mouth.

“This tastes great! Still...” He thought back to his old life, wistful. “I wish I could have some white rice with this.”

And so sat a solitary old man, alone in the middle of the vast Green Depths, munching on rabbit meat. He struck a pitiful figure—almost like that of a man flung back to primitive times—as he devoured his game in silence. Nonetheless, he continued to eat. He was hungry, after all.

Once he had finished, he used a rope to affix himself to the top of a tree, where he decided to sleep for the night. Sleeping up there, he’d calculated, would be safer than spending the night on the ground. Yet when he woke the next morning, he felt a painful ache from his buttocks, and decided then and there to give up on the idea next time.

Thus began the second day of Satoshi’s life stranded in the wilderness.

“Ugh, last night was terrible. My ass is killing me...”

Had anyone else been around to hear him, they might well have gotten the wrong idea from Satoshi’s grumbling.

“I guess I should do some more hunting today to try and get a better idea of my skills. How about I test my swords? There’s no point having them if I don’t know how strong I am, after all. Heck, I could even end up killing someone by accident if I’m not careful.”

He couldn’t complain about the power of these weapons. Or rather, if anything, they were *too* powerful.

The two swords that hung by Satoshi’s waist were brutal weapons, but they looked rather plain. Not so much as to stand out—the rest of Satoshi’s gear looked just as bland, after all—but regardless, they were the kind of thing that nobody would think anything of. At any rate, Satoshi was the perfect picture of an unremarkable middle-aged mage.

Yet while he didn’t have the ultimate, legendary gear, Satoshi displayed an

unusual level of strength that had left him unmatched in-game. If any real human were to have that level of power, it was a given that they would strike fear into the hearts of everyone around them. And Satoshi didn't want to end up in a life of solitude—nor one where he was the target of jealousy and envy. Whatever it took, he didn't want to get stuck alone.

With that in mind, his only choice was to overwhelm his opponents in a way that hid his true power as much as possible. So he'd been holding back wherever he could. Still, he was missing a crucial piece of information: he didn't know what was considered normal in this world.

"In the end, I guess I'll just have to get used to this body, huh? Sounds like a pain..."

Having spent almost the last decade living a laid-back life in the countryside, Satoshi wasn't much for taking initiative and trying out new things. Nor was he still at the age that he'd get carried away by his power and start to think of himself as a god or anything.

Still, if he were going to fulfill his humble dream of building a normal family, he would absolutely need to get a good idea of his strength.

"It'd be nice if I could find a decent opponent somewhere to test things out on..."

Just as he said that, Satoshi was alerted to a creature of some sort entering the range of his Vigilance skill.

Having a skill that could actively feed him information like that was rather helpful.

Rustle.

Satoshi focused on the sound of something making its way through the vegetation, and drew the swords from his waist.

What appeared before him was an obese monster with the head of a pig. Another classic fantasy monster—this time, some sort of orc.

"So it's a 'meat orc,' huh? Okay, surely that's gotta be edible. Should I give it a shot?"

It was what was known as an edible monster. As the name would imply, it could be turned into a pile of delicious meat.

At the same time, orcs were infamous as the perverted villains of fantasy worlds. And that was no less true in this world.

Orcs were highly fertile, and their lust was never-ending; there could never be enough female orcs. Even in the game, they reproduced at an astonishing rate, making battles against large groups of orcs a common occurrence. Both warlike and omnivorous, orcs were a constant threat, driving the world's other inhabitants to work constantly at suppressing the orc population. These meat orcs, however, were less humanoid and more resembled pigs, walking on all fours.

Their legs were short, and their arms—made less for holding things and more for running along the ground—were almost more like forelegs. It was easy to see them as the primordial ancestors of the orc family. Of course, they were still capable of holding tools; but their hands, each with just three fat fingers, were clearly clumsy at doing so.

In short, they didn't look particularly human—and Satoshi felt little hesitation at the idea of eating them.

Satoshi closed the distance in a flash, and another instant was all he needed to slay the meat orc with his swords.

"I was holding back, and it was *still* a one-hit kill. I wonder, just how much of a monster am I?"

While the orc had noticed Satoshi, it hadn't been able to make any kind of counterattack in time. That was just how fast Satoshi's attack had been; he'd been almost like a certain wandering swordsman. He was becoming more and more uncertain about his own power.

Satoshi quickly butchered the orc and got back on the move. And so began a cycle in which he would come across a monster, only to quickly turn the tables on it. It didn't take long for him to reach a conclusion: he was so overpowered it wasn't even funny.

"Well, I've got myself some food now. It'd be nice to have something other

than just meat, though.”

Satoshi knew it wouldn't be long before he got tired of eating meat for three meals a day. Worried about his diet becoming unbalanced, he tried to forage for some edible plants and the like, but all he was finding were medicinal plants and types of seeds—things with names like the “bloody belladonna.” In short, he wouldn't have much use for them other than creating deadly poisons.

“Technically I should be able to turn the poison into medicine, but it's worthless if I don't have the right equipment for it. I guess I could try magical alchemy? But...no. Even if I managed to make some potions, I wouldn't have any containers to keep them in.”

Essentially, all Satoshi was doing was collecting items that he had no way of using.

“I wish... I wish I at least had some bread. Or some white rice. I miss rice...”

It was only the second day of his survival challenge, and Satoshi was already throwing in the towel.

As someone who'd changed jobs to become a farmer after the global financial crisis, he was used to putting up with some level of inconvenience. Still, being thrown into this kind of vagrant lifestyle, stuck in the middle of nowhere, was tough for him. Asking someone from modern society to suddenly start living a primitive life was a tall order, after all.

Satoshi continued to walk through the forest. Yet what he found was not the native people of the land, but rather an endless string of brutal monsters, each rushing in to attack him, each seeing him as nothing but food. It happened often enough that he started to seriously wonder whether it might be easier for him to just give up on it all and die.

Through it all, he continued to stock up on materials, and his diet remained unchanged. He was getting sick of this violent life.

“Why can't I find any edible plants or grasses? Having nothing but meat has got to be terrible for my nutrition...”

While Satoshi had the Find Plants skill, it was doing him no good. All that was coming out of his mouth were complaints.

“Who the hell do they think they are, calling themselves goddesses?! They’re my enemies, that’s who they are! My *enemies!*”

GYUOOOOHHHHHHHH!

It appeared suddenly, flying down from the sky as if to punish Satoshi for the sin of insulting the gods.

Coming toward him was a denizen of the sky, covered in green scales and staring with a head perched at the end of a long neck. Sharp claws protruded from its two feet, and the inside of its mouth was lined with razor-edged teeth.

“A-A wyvern?!”

The wyvern was a persistent hunter, trying doggedly to get Satoshi inside its stomach. Attempt after attempt—each time striking and retreating, striking and retreating.

Satoshi couldn’t be expected to deal with a flying creature, especially in a body he still wasn’t used to. All he could do was dodge its attacks over and over as he continued to run away.

The wyvern’s breath, and the echoing sound of explosions, swept through the forest.

It was a game of tag, with his life on the line—and it stretched on until sunrise.

Chapter 2: The Old Guy Has a Run-of-the-Mill Encounter

It had been about a week since Satoshi had reincarnated into this new world.

Finally now he managed to come out onto a man-made highway, putting an end to his long days of surviving in the wilderness.

The Far-Flung Green Depths had been a harsh place, scene after scene of carnage. After the goblins, Satoshi had been beset by orcs, wyverns, trolls, man-eaters, chimeras, and all sorts of other creatures, one after another, forcing him to battle without rest. When he had tried to rest in a cave, it had ended up being a nest of killer ants; when he had tried to catch his breath by the side of a river, he had been attacked by lizardmen; and when he had tried to sleep along a rocky crag, he'd been set upon by a crazy ape with a particular interest in his rear.

It had all worn down his mind rather badly over the course of just a week.

"I've done it! I've finally done it! I can finally go to a *town*! With *people* in it! Oh, that took so long... Ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha..."

To anyone who saw him, Satoshi would have looked terribly haggard. Yet physically he was still at the peak of health, and he hadn't used more than the tiniest sliver of mana.

While he was relieved to have escaped the forest's violent, dog-eat-dog world, looking back on his harsh time there made him feel depressed. Still—that was in the past. He had found a highway.

"All righty. Which way should I go to find a town? I've got two options, but I'm not sure which one will get me to a town faster... Hmm. It's a tough choice."

Satoshi picked up a nearby stick, deciding to drop it and then set off in whichever direction it pointed toward. After twenty-three attempts, it finally fell pointing to the left—and so he decided to head right.

His harsh week in the wilderness had turned him into a rather petty person.

*

The road Satoshi walked along was fairly crude, having been made simply by felling trees to form a path that had then been leveled out. It wasn't as if any stones had been laid; the path was merely bare earth, with weeds poking through here and there.

Satoshi realized that any rain would turn this place into essentially a river.

In spite of that, though, his footsteps were incredibly light. After all, this road had a good chance of leading him to other humans. And if it did, he should at the very least be able to interact with people—maybe even make some friends.

Having survived a long week out in the wild, Satoshi yearned to be with other people.

“Honestly, I don't even care if they're bandits at this point. I just want to find *someone...*”

Of course, any meeting between Satoshi and a pack of bandits would inevitably turn into a slaughter. The bandits would be massacred without a chance.

Satoshi had, after all, spent the past week putting his life on the line as he fought to survive in the wilderness. He would no longer hesitate to kill; if danger approached, he was perfectly prepared to use lethal force.

It showed just how much the forest's harsh environment had worn down his psyche.

*

As he walked, Satoshi had a realization.

“You know, I haven't been able to take a bath in a while. I probably stink, don't I?”

Satoshi hadn't had a single chance to wash himself during his time in the forest. He was starting to get worried about his body odor.

“I guess I should start by getting myself clean. It'd be nice to find a river...

Regardless, I should probably hold off on meeting anyone for now. I bet I look like a bandit myself at the moment.”

But despite his concerns, Satoshi continued to follow the road.

Whether some kind god was listening or he merely had a flash of good luck, it didn't take long before Satoshi came across a river. And what was more, he noticed a man-made bridge stretching across it. While the river wasn't all that wide—merely seven meters from bank to bank—he was thankful for the water it provided.

Hoping to get some privacy, Satoshi walked a short distance downstream, finding a spot where he wouldn't be seen from the bridge. Then he threw off his equipment and plunged, as fast as his legs would take him, into the river. It was his first bath in what seemed like forever—and despite the cold water, it felt surprisingly pleasant.

Satoshi gave his body a thorough wash—especially his top half—to get rid of all the dirt he'd accumulated. He also washed his clothes, and laid them out to dry on a nearby rock while he prepared a meal. If he had one complaint, it was that he still had nothing to eat but meat.

As his clothes continued to dry, Satoshi looked out along the riverbank, admiring the sight. Fish of all sorts of unusual shapes were swimming through the water.

It had been a while since he'd seen such a peaceful scene, and he was grateful for the change of pace.

The faint smile that flashed across his face from time to time was making him look a little creepy, though.

*

“I wonder if my clothes are dry yet. I'd hate to put them back on if they're still damp...”

With the sun shining directly overhead, Satoshi was quick to get back into his now-clean clothes, and he reequipped his gear with the confidence of a man who was well accustomed to it. The past week had given him plenty of practice at putting on his gear back on like this, and it hadn't taken long to become just

another part of his routine.

Ordinarily anyone from the modern world would've found it preposterous to wear this sort of equipment. But Satoshi was a good example of the human ability to adapt to a new environment.

As time passed, Satoshi saw the occasional horse-drawn carriage cross the bridge, each one looking as if it belonged to a merchant. That only bolstered his hopes that he was near a human settlement—a thought that made his heart leap for joy. He returned back upstream to cross the bridge, climbed the embankment, and set off walking once again, following the path the carriages had taken.

Another carriage passed by him, this one bright white and awfully luxurious. Satoshi, however, paid it no mind; he had no interest in interacting with the sort of influential people he expected to find inside. He continued to head straight along the path, a spring in his step.

As Satoshi forged ahead, he used enhancement magic on himself, boosting his physical abilities to help him go faster. He ran for some thirty minutes—then stopped, sensing the presence of a large group of people ahead. It was time to stay on guard.

This was one of the benefits of Satoshi's Scouting skill: even without him doing anything, it would activate by itself to inform him of potential opponents. It had been a truly convenient ability during his time in the forest.

"If I assume this is some kind of run-of-the-mill encounter, then... Hmm. I wonder if they're bandits? It's hard to say anything for sure, though, so I shouldn't just attack them out of nowhere. I guess I'll hide my presence and see what's going on. If they *are* bandits... Well, I can deal with that when the time comes."

Lives might not have held much value in this world, but no civilized person would run in unannounced swinging a sword about—or decide to shoot magic first, ask questions later. No, Satoshi's response would depend on what was *really* going on. So for now, he decided, it would be best to conceal himself among some trees and gather information.

The first thing he noticed was that the majority of the people in front of him

were men in dirty clothing. All of these men held weapons, and they were surrounding a number of merchants. Satoshi's suspicions had been right on the mark.

"Ooooookay. This is definitely a crime scene, right? Well, I'm only going off circumstantial evidence for now, so I guess I'll wait for something more concrete before I decide whether to barge in or not..."

All Satoshi had seen so far, after all, was the men surrounding the merchants. Maybe a greedy merchant had tricked them, and they'd come for payback. Satoshi decided it'd be safe to wait and see what exactly was happening before he made himself known.

"Are they the good guys? Or the bad guys...?"

Whatever the case, Satoshi decided to bide his time.

*

A horse-drawn carriage rolled along the Far-Flung Highway.

It was a carriage of luxurious design, colored a classy bright white and adorned with a modest gold trim.

Two knights sat on standby at the front, with two more well-dressed individuals sitting inside the carriage itself.

The first of those inside was an elderly man who looked like a mage, sitting calmly and quietly as the carriage rolled along. Dressed in a pure white robe, he had the blood of royalty—that of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia—running through his veins, and he had lived a long life as the duke in charge of this territory. He was retired now, though, just another elderly man who loved to dote on his granddaughter.

His name was Creston von Solistia.

After passing on the title of family head to his son, he had watched as the rest of his family had been drawn into an escalating conflict between his two grandsons. These days, his granddaughter, Celestina, was about the only one who could make him feel at peace.

That same granddaughter sat beside him now, lost in thought, her eyes

scanning the pages of a book.

Celestina was treated very coldly by the ducal family. In a land where magic was authority, she was hopeless at controlling magic—and as a result, she was viewed with contempt by those around her.

Human or otherwise, every creature in this world had mana that allowed it to control magic. Celestina, however, had remarkably little talent in this regard. What was worse, she had not been born to one of the duchesses. This had stirred up a terrible jealousy, which had manifested itself in cruel abuse.

Put plainly, she was an illegitimate child, born of the union between the current duke and a manor servant he had laid his hands on. That, paired with her inability to use magic, had made her the target of harsh bullying that continued to this day—albeit most of it from the duchesses.

Despite this, Creston doted on his only granddaughter. He lived with her in the separate home he had moved to upon retiring, and he had made use of every resource available to him to try and help the girl develop her abilities. So far, however, none of it had worked.

He had asked a number of famous state mages to serve as her private tutors—yet all of them had failed, serving only to further cement Celestina's reputation as utterly talentless. All he wanted was to see her happy, but his efforts had ultimately done nothing but put her in an even more difficult spot.

Despite this weighing on his mind, Creston could always spare a kind smile for his granddaughter. It was a smile, however, that would occasionally let slip a hint of pity.

Celestina, for her part, was fully aware of her grandfather's kindness. And that only made her all the more determined to keep putting in effort.

She held real gratitude and respect for her grandfather, who showed her love and fair treatment in spite of her illegitimate background. Yet however much she felt his love—and however hard she worked to show her thanks for it—she believed her efforts would be futile if they bore no fruit. Her own smile had become a forced one, hiding a great deal of sadness behind it.

And that, too, was difficult for Creston to bear.

“Ah...” Celestina let out a gasp of mild surprise as the carriage pulled from the main road onto a bridge.

“What is it, Tina? Did you see something?”

“Yes, Grandfather. A mage—and yet he seems to be carrying two swords.”

“Two swords? As a mage, you say? Did you really see such a man?”

“Yes. He had a gray robe, and he was rather—well...”

“Shabby-looking, was he? Hmmm. Gray robes would make him a lower-ranked mage. Or perhaps he’s here on a journey from abroad?”

It was customary in this country for the color of a mage’s robes to represent their rank. Gray robes indicated a lower-class mage, while intermediate mages wore black, and advanced mages wore deep crimson. White was reserved for the elites, who worked directly for the state. Any man walking around a place like this in gray robes would therefore have to be either a lower-class mage or a traveler from another country. As a magic kingdom, Solistia was on the cutting edge of magical research—but internally, it was divided into a number of factions, each pulling the strings of power in a different direction.

Even in a fantasy world, there was no escaping power struggles.

“So you say he was carrying *swords*, yes? Likely to make up for his shortcomings as a mage, I suppose, but that still seems a rather awkward choice to make.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. Just as mages work to hone their magic, swordsmen must devote themselves to the sword. But to try and take on *both* of those? I would assume he can only be a half-baked spellsword—as they say, a jack-of-all-trades is a master of none.”

Magic, swords... Each had their own benefits and drawbacks. Magic was excellent for long-distance combat and support purposes, but it was pathetically unfit for close-range fights. Swords, on the other hand, dominated in close quarters, but struggled to defend against attacks from a distance,

leaving swordsmen liable to be defeated immediately if targeted by the full might of a mage at a comfortable distance.

How one dealt with that dichotomy was a matter of strategy; it was not as if either side was unquestionably stronger than the other.

To master both disciplines, one would likely need to devote themselves to harsher training than could be fit into a single lifetime. And even then, such harsh training required a great deal of willpower and talent.

“Still, mayhaps he is merely carrying around those swords for self-defense. Mages are terribly weak if you can get next to them, after all.”

“Whatever he’s doing, he must be working hard. I still have so far to go. Rather, I haven’t even been able to get started yet...”

Despite her melancholy, Celestina continued to read over a textbook from the magical academy.

While she’d managed to memorize magic formulas, she struggled to actually activate them. Time and time again, she’d looked to make sure that there was no problem with the formulas themselves, yet unfortunately, she had failed to reach any conclusion.

The two continued to talk, their carriage traveling farther along the road. But then, all of a sudden, Creston noticed the carriage slowing to a halt. He called out to the knight holding the horses’ reins.

“What’s happened?”

“It looks like some merchants have stopped ahead of us in the middle of the path, sir. We can’t get past.”

“Stopped, you say? Have they had an accident of some kind?”

“The road seems to be blocked by a fallen tree. It looks like the merchants and their mercenaries are trying to move it out of the way.”

“Hmm. A fallen tree, is it? Remain on your guard. I have an ill feeling about this.”

“Understo— *Uogh!*”

The knight who had been seated at the front of the carriage let out a sudden cry. Creston's ill feeling had been justified.

Bandits had been hiding in the forest—and they'd attacked in unison with bows, sending down a rain of arrows.

"B-Bandits!" cried a merchant.

"Guards, protect us! *Gyaahh!*"

"Shit, it was an ambush!"

"Use the carriages as a shield! We're gonna counterattack the archers!"

While the merchants panicked, a fight broke out between their mercenaries and the bandits. One merchant, who had been hit by the first volley of arrows, writhed about in an unsightly manner. Fortunately, his injury wouldn't be lethal—but he was letting the mercenaries have an earful.

"G-Grandfather!"

"You stay here and hide, Celestina. I shall join the fray!"

Gripping a dagger, Creston stepped out of the carriage. He drew the silver-colored blade from its sheath.

Creston's dagger was an enchanted blade, imbued with magic that formed a barrier around the wielder. The two knights, meanwhile, readied their shields, which they used to stave off the second volley of arrows.

"Well. This is unfortunate. There are rather too many of those bandit fellows. And we're already surrounded, it would appear..."

While he had his magic dagger, it only held so much mana within it. Once that mana ran out, Creston's defenses would be sorely lacking.

Should it turn into a close-range battle, the winner would be determined by numbers. In other words, even the side with weaker fighters would come out victorious if they were more numerous.

That was the bandits. They had blocked the road and likely intended to slaughter all of the merchants and mercenaries before taking off with their money and goods.

However, his granddaughter's life was on the line. Creston didn't have a choice.

While he would've liked to attack them with magic, he'd have needed to spend time on an incantation—and surrounded as they were, that would've made him the perfect target. Not to mention, switching to the offensive would've required him to cancel his barrier, leaving him and the other defenders wide open to a barrage that could take them down all at once. In essence, the enemy had gotten one step ahead of them, leaving their options limited.

The mercenaries were starting to panic.

"We wanna get the guys behind the carriage, but we're surrounded! Hey, old-timer, how much longer is that magic dagger gonna last?"

"Who knows? It's naught but magic stored inside a blade, after all. It wouldn't be odd for it to run out at any moment."

"I don't suppose these guys are gonna let us go, are they?"

"It's as you say. Now that we've seen their faces, they'll be intending to kill every last one of us."

"But we've got nothing left up our sleeves, huh..."

Given that the dagger's mana was limited, a prolonged fight was a bad idea. But at the same time, losing the barrier would leave them open to a barrage of arrows, leaving no opportunity to switch over to the offense. The bandits had put together a rather effective plan, and they'd executed it well.

"Ba ha ha ha ha! We're gonna have all you fuckers die for us, okay? And we'll be taking your women, your children, and anything worth money. Any brats, we'll sell off as slaves for some cash. The bitches—well, we'll sell them too, but only after we've had some fun with 'em."

"Look at these bastards! Thinking they can pull this on us..."

"We're not gonna let you take us down without a fight!"

"So you're an energetic lot, huh? But here's the thing: what are you gonna *do* about it? You're all gonna die either way, so just be good boys for us and let us

kill ya without the hassle.”

The man who looked like the bandits’ leader was feeling confident.

It was a commonly known fact that magic blades would only work for so long; as long as you knew the right way to fight against them, you could keep casualties on your side to a minimum. And anyone pulling a plan like this had probably done it a number of times before.

“This is bad. The mana’s starting to run out.”

“It’s all or nothing, then. Should we take a shot at it?”

“That may be our only option. This would be simple if I could use my magic, but they’d doubtless aim for me as soon as I began the incantation...”

“Hey, gramps! Looks like that magic dagger of yours is gettin’ weaker! Well, don’t worry—you can just leave it to us and go to hell without any worries. We’ll take good care of it. Ba ha ha ha ha!”

The bandits and their boss were in high spirits. They were utterly confident in their plan working, right from the start. But they had forgotten that even the best laid plans could, every now and again, be ruined by unforeseeable factors.

And here came one such factor—a solitary man, waltzing up unannounced to oppose them.

“You’re blocking traffic, guys. Out of the way. *Frozen Flower*.”

All of a sudden, the forest surrounding the merchants turned white. It had been frozen solid—as had the bandits hiding among its trees. Then came a *crack*: the ice shattering into pieces.

The sound of arrows whizzing in from the forest fell silent. That just left the bandits who were blocking the road directly ahead and to the rear.

“There’s a saying: ‘To see what is right and not do it is a lack of courage.’ Well, my *own* motto is ‘A quiet life’s a good life,’ though...”

“Who’s there? Come out and face us!”

As if in response to the bandit leader’s provocation, the man casually climbed up on top of the white carriage.

It was really very cliché—like he'd been waiting for exactly that opportunity.

He was clad in a gray robe, and his messy hair had been grown out so lazily that it covered his eyes.

A lone mage of medium build, stubble on his face.

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Satoshi had just been traveling along the road, minding his own business. But with a bunch of shady-looking men having *blocked* that road, he had hidden himself to get a grasp on the situation, peeking out from between the trees to gather intel.

Going from the conversations he could hear and the way things were developing, it didn't take long for him to figure out he was dealing with bandits. He refused to simply overlook it—and so without any real choice, he intervened, saving lives his top priority. After all, the merchants were surrounded; they had nowhere to run.

“You fucker. You got my buddies real good.”

“Your ‘buddies’? Oh—you meant to say ‘disposable tools,’ right? I’m sure that’s all you see them as, after all.”

“Shut yer gab! So *what* if they’re disposable? Doesn’t mean I want ya fuckin’ killin’ ’em, does it?! They’re *my* tools, and *I* decide what to do with ’em!”

“What a nasty thing to say. Well, not that I really care... *Dark Lightning Concerto!*”

Small black beads, countless in number, began to form around Satoshi. Looking at them, the bandits...couldn't help but laugh. After all, there might have been a lot of them, but they were just little beads—almost like black ball bearings—floating in midair.

It didn't take long for that laughter to turn to fear.

Like bullets, the countless black beads shot over and pierced the body of one of the bandits. But they hadn't finished yet; the bullets lodged inside the man unleashed a fierce surge of lightning from inside, burning him to ashes. The remaining bandits, having seen one of their own reduced to charcoal in barely

an instant, devolved into chaos.

After all, they had never seen a spell like this before. It was no surprise that they knew no way to deal with it.

“Bad luck. I might not look like it, but I’m pretty good in a melee, you see. And you guys are the perfect sitting ducks. You’re all grouped up, so I don’t even have to aim... Well, anyway, I’ve got a bit of a request for you all: you’re in the way, so I’d kind of like you to scram. Don’t stick around unless you want to get turned into ash.”



Satoshi delivered that last line in a different voice—not his usual lilting tone, but one cold enough to send a shiver down the spines of those around him.

“Y-You’re a monster... What even *is* that magic? I’ve never seen it before. Never even heard of it...”

“Huh. First time I’ve ever killed someone, and I don’t feel a thing. I wonder if I’ve finally lost it.”

“Shut up! Look at you, popping out behind us and pulling some dirty fucking trick... Fight me like a man!”

“What right does a bandit have to say that? But, well, if you insist—I’ll take you up on your offer!”

Taking the bandit leader’s raving to heart, Satoshi closed the distance between them in a moment and lopped the man’s arm off with ease.

For a moment, the bandit leader had no idea what had happened. But looking down at his own arm lying on the ground brought him up to speed.

At some point, the mage had drawn two swords, one in each hand.

And as the bandit leader looked at his arm, cut clean off, fear rushed down his spine.

“There you go. Just what you wanted: I came at you fair and square, head-on. Happy now?”

“GAAAAAAH! My arm! My *aaaaarm*!”

“Oops. I shouldn’t be focusing *too* much on that guy. Guess I’ll deal with the rest of them now... Can’t say I’m a fan of this dog-eat-dog world, though.”

Nobody had been able to keep up with Satoshi’s movements.

He spoke casually enough, but he’d moved like lightning, appearing right in front of the bandit leader’s eyes and lopping off his arm. His movements clearly weren’t those of an ordinary human—and after coming face-to-face with such a monster, the bandits fell into despair.

In the blink of an eye, they were completely at Satoshi’s mercy. Having spent the past week starving for proper food, his entire life having become a harsh

struggle for survival, he was no longer the kind of man to hold back on an enemy.

Survival of the fittest changed people. Made them brutal.

The mercenaries, too, were astonished by their sudden backup.

“S-So fast. What the hell was that speed?”

“He used magic as well. Just how skilled *is* this guy...?”

“Swords *and* magic? He’s gotta be practically invincible!”

More than astonishment, though, they felt shivers trickling down their spines.

If they were to come up against him on a battlefield, they’d almost certainly be annihilated. Killed without even the chance to run.

From the mercenaries’ point of view, the colossal difference in their strength was clear. Their only saving grace was that he wasn’t their enemy.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” one of the bandits finally cried. “I’m outta here!”

“R-Run! We’re all gonna die!”

“I won’t be a bandit anymore! I’ll go plow fields in the countryside!”

“It’s a demon! A demon’s come to get us!”

When it came down to it, the bandits were amateurs, not seasoned fighters. The instant a truly strong foe emerged, they started to collapse.

“Look at you all, treating me like I’m some kind of monster. Like *you’ve* done nothing wrong. What a bunch of rude bastards. I’d be happy to teach you how to behave properly. You’d have to give me your lives as a tip, though...”

Satoshi mouthed off at the men, indignant and annoyed. They weren’t entirely wrong, though—in terms of strength alone, he was indeed quite the monster.

“Don’t let them get away! Kill them all!”

“You think you can mess with us and go home alive?!”

“It’s time for payback, you sacks of shit!”

The mercenaries chased after the fleeing bandits, venting their earlier anger in nothing less than a bloodbath.

Possessing no real fighting ability to begin with, the bandits would've been mad to try and fight back against the mercenaries. While they had managed to make up for it earlier with numbers, that advantage had vanished with the appearance of their unexpected intruder.

In their frenzied attempt to escape, the bandits couldn't even begin to mount a counterattack on the enraged mercenaries. They were all slaughtered in no time.

"‘All things must pass,’ I suppose... Makes me feel a little empty inside. Or is this more like that one haiku? ‘All that remains of soldiers’ impossible dreams,’ was it?"

"Well, well, you certainly seem to have saved us here today. Please, allow me to thank you!"

Satoshi heard a voice suddenly call out to him—but he needed a moment to compose himself. The voice had come from an elderly man who, judging by his looks, was of high social standing. Likely a noble of some sort.

Worried the man would notice his panic, Satoshi decided to don a mask of calm and speak his mind, acting as if he were without a worry in the world. Despite his appearance, Satoshi was a timid, incredibly cautious man.

"Don't worry about it. I just happened to be heading in this direction."

"Nonetheless, you saved my granddaughter from peril. It is only natural for me to show you my gratitude."

"I'll gladly accept it, then. Oh—could you tell me if there's a town or a settlement along this road? It's a little embarrassing to admit, but I've gotten lost..."

"There's a town in my territory, yes. Still—lost, you say?"

"Yes. Really, it's rather embarrassing. Both lost on the roads and lost in life, you could say..."

"Well, I'm not quite sure I understand what you're going through, but it

sounds like you have it hard.”

Satoshi had put his all into a self-deprecating joke, only for it to fly over the old noble’s head.

Creston, for his part, could scarcely believe that the shabby mage before him—scratching his head with an ashamed look on his face—was the same man who had just moments ago wielded magic beyond the realm of common sense.

Yet as Creston looked more closely, he noticed the man’s robe was made of materials from a monster he had never seen before. It was clear that he was a highly ranked mage. And if a mage from another country was out on a journey, it likely meant he was either searching for information on an enemy state, or had been kicked out of his own country for one reason or another.

With this in mind, Creston was awash with caution. He was keeping a close eye on Satoshi’s behavior.

“What should I call you, good man?”

“Me? Osa— No. Zelos Merlin. Just a humble mage.”

At this moment, Satoshi officially became Zelos Merlin—his character from the game.

His Japanese name would clearly be conspicuous here—and he reasoned that were he to screw up and put himself in the limelight somehow, he didn’t want his name adding fuel to the fire and drawing further attention to him. Even in a situation like this, where the risks were minor, he still wanted to minimize them.

“Hmm. Not a name I’ve heard before. What brings you to these lands? I’m sure a mage as powerful as yourself would be in great demand in other countries.”

“Well, I’m not that young anymore. I’ve been thinking I’d like to live out the rest of my life in peace, so I set out to find a nice town to live in. Working for some country or another seems a bit of a bother at my age, you see.”

“I understand. And you’re a researcher of sorts, I suppose? I’ve never seen magic like yours before...”

“It’s embarrassing to say, but...yes, I spent so long researching magic that I’m probably too old to get married now.”

“Ah, but you’re still young, are you not? Not old enough to be giving up just yet, at least!”

“Life is short. Who knows where I’ll be a decade from now? I just want to have a home of my own and live out the rest of my life cultivating a field or something.”

It was a humble dream—not one of a man with high ambition. And he didn’t seem to be lying. Having made that judgment, Creston was starting to take quite a liking to this mage who called himself Zelos.

There was no shortage of mages in the ranks of the nobility who basked in their own authority and wielded their power with glee, all the while dismissing the very notion of bettering themselves as people. Creston had grown rather fed up with those types.

Compared to them, Zelos—who showed no real desire to wield his power over others—gave Creston a good feeling. He decided he’d like to form a friendly relationship with this foreign mage.

Hmm. Well, he’s certainly an exceptional mage. I could even end up asking him to tutor my Tina. If he’s a researcher, I imagine he’s likely dabbled in all sorts of matters himself...and if he’s from another country, he may well have different ideas from those of the mages in these parts... Yes, yes. Now, let’s see...

Creston was zoning out, his head filled with thoughts of nothing but his granddaughter.

Perhaps he could even fix Tina’s problem? Oh, Tina...what I wouldn’t give to see that smile on your face again. If it was for you, I’d— Oh...

“Uh...sir? Are you okay? I was getting worried there for a moment...”

“Wha—?! No, I’m perfectly all right! Nothing to worry about, lad!”

Satoshi—or Zelos, now—was wondering whether the old noble in front of him might not be all there in the head.

But it seemed merely that the old man's love for his granddaughter occasionally manifested itself in strange ways.

"Anyway, returning to the matter at hand—I simply *must* give you some sort of reward."

"Huh? No, I don't need anything. I just did all that for my own sake, after all..."

"For us nobles, this is a matter of duty and honor. At any rate, if I were to let the man who saved us go empty-handed, who knows what sort of censure I might face..."

"Sounds like being a noble can be tough. I'm glad I was born a commoner."

"Right you are! I've retired, myself, and yet all these responsibilities still follow me around... Regardless, you must allow me to show you my gratitude."

Although it was a mere coincidence that those Zelos had saved were nobles, they still seemed obliged to give him a reward, despite all they'd already gone through. He didn't envy their position.

Still, he couldn't allow the man to lose face. So, after pondering the matter for a few seconds, he decided to start to tell the man what he wanted.

"Well, then, let's see... I'd like a quiet plot of land. As long as it's a little out of town, and somewhere I could cultivate a field, I'd be happy. After all, all I want is to grow some vegetables and some medicinal herbs—just a quiet life..."

"Of course. Let me see what I can find."

"Thank you. I imagine you'll need to rest up and get back to your journey first, of course..."

With that sorted, Zelos's mind drifted to the memory of a white monkey he'd encountered in the Green Depths.

What a perverted monster! It had quietly crept up to him as he'd slept on a rocky crag, then tried to take off his pants and have its way with him. A dangerous weapon had stood at attention between the creature's legs as it chased after Zelos, a look of ecstasy on its face. That encounter had taught him the true meaning of fear.

Zelos blanched at the memory.

“Are you all right there? You seem to be feeling rather unwell...”

“Oh, I’m all right. Just remembering something unpleasant. Aha ha...”

You could see the grief in his hunched posture.

Ahead of the two men, some of the mercenaries poured oil over the bandits’ bodies, then lit them on fire to dispose of the remains. Others were treating the wounded, and others still worked in a team to move the fallen tree from the road.

The bandits had acted suddenly and selfishly, and cleaning up after their ambush was a pain for those who’d gotten caught up in it. Nonetheless, it wasn’t long before the mercenaries’ efforts saw the road ahead cleared. The merchants returned to their carriages and got back on the move.

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“Would you like to join us? We’re still a decent while away from the town.”

“Hmmm... Roughly how far would you say, in terms of time? I don’t know much about this place, and that includes the roads.”

“Around three days by carriage, I would wager. Perhaps a bit longer depending on how things go.”

“Three days by carriage, huh? I finally make my way out of that damned forest, and it’d still take me who knows how many days to get anywhere by foot...”

As one would expect, Zelos really wanted to eat something other than meat at this point. That being the case, he only had one choice.

“I’ll take you up on your offer, then. Thank you. Urgh, I don’t want to see any more meat for a while...”

“I don’t quite understand what you’re on about, but...regardless, come on up. We’d be reassured to have a man of your caliber with us.”

If it was going to take a full three days to finish the journey, the travelers would absolutely have some food other than meat with them. They’d likely also

packed some extra food, just in case—so Zelos was hoping there'd be enough for him too. Ultimately, he had decided to go with the travelers out of pure self-interest.

Zelos climbed hesitantly into the luxurious carriage. But as he did, his eyes fell upon the figure of a girl sitting inside.

The girl had long, straight blonde hair and blue eyes; her clothing was blue as well. All of this contributed to an overall cute impression, as befit her age. But what Zelos noticed most about the girl was her expression, which seemed somehow clouded over.

She was somewhere in her early teens—likely putting her on the verge of adulthood in this world, if Zelos were to go by his knowledge of your average light novel. She wore a robe that resembled some sort of uniform, and seemed to be studying a book that lay open in her lap.

“Grandfather? Who’s this?”

“This is the man who saved us from our little predicament. His name is Zelos.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Zelos Merlin, a mage. I won’t be traveling with you for too long—just until we reach the town. I’ll be in your care.”

“O-Oh! Sorry! I’m Celestina. I, um, look forward to your company.”

Going by appearances, the girl seemed to be a mage. Yet despite that, Zelos couldn’t sense much mana from her.

Mages typically had a fair amount of mana flowing out from them—something that made them easy to notice with the Scouting skill. That had been the case in the game, and it seemed to be true here as well; Zelos had confirmed as much from his time surviving in the forest.

“Are you a mage?” he asked.

“She’s only just a novice. But she’s got a bit of a problem, you see.”

“A problem? Actually, no, I...I probably shouldn’t pry too much into the details. Sorry.”

“No, there’s no need to apologize. In fact, we just so happen to want a fresh opinion from a foreign mage. To tell you the truth, she can’t actually activate

any spells.”

“She can’t activate them? That sounds odd. Is that even possible?”

If this world worked the same way as in the game, the very fact that a caster’s spells weren’t activating was unusual.

“She does have some mana, yes? Hmm...”

“She does...but for whatever reason, she finds herself unable to activate even basic spells. I’ve tried all sorts of things myself, but I still haven’t been able to determine the cause.”

“In that case... I wonder if the magic formulas themselves are the problem?”

The two nobles immediately looked up to meet Zelos’s gaze.

“Wh-What do you mean by that? I’m told these formulas were fine-tuned to burden the user as little as possible! They’re used throughout the whole country! Are you saying they’re flawed?”

“Probably. Either there’s something wrong with the amount of mana that the spells have been set to require, or... Perhaps the formulas themselves are defective? Not that I can say anything without actually seeing them, mind you.”

“I-Is that really the sort of thing you can tell just by looking?!”

“Well, I’ve created a fair few spells myself. So if I can see what we’re dealing with, I should at least be able to get a general idea...”

“Th-They’re the spells from this book! Is there anything wrong with them?!”

Celestina drew closer to Zelos with a burst of energy.

He pulled back at first, surprised by her vigor. When he saw how serious her expression was, however, he decided to take a look at the book.

The spells that Zelos saw within resembled ones he knew, and they were all basic in nature. Looking at them, however, made him feel that something was considerably off.

An awful lot of the book’s magic formulas had unnecessary parts mixed in, creating all sorts of waste. There was no way these would activate properly. Or at least, any caster who *did* manage to make them work would be doing so

almost entirely through brute force.

“What’s *wrong* with this? There are so many things wrong that it almost seems intentional. It all just looks so messy; there are problems all over the place. This is terrible.”

“What?!”

“So it really *was*...!”

The two spoke almost simultaneously.

“How do I explain this... There are all these unnecessary magic letters mixed in, and the actual purposes of the spells are getting lost. These formulas just leave everything up to the caster; even if you did manage to cast them, you’d be relying entirely on your own power. These are horrific.”

“So... What does that mean?”

Celestina had been expecting something like this, but it wasn’t as if she’d been confident.

Now, her suspicions validated, she was looking up at the middle-aged man before her with sparkling eyes.

“These formulas seem like only a select handful of people could use them. Considering how much mana they’d need to use up for even basic spells, then, uh...” He hesitated for a moment. “It’s kind of hard to say, but I’m guessing that the mages in this country are operating at a fairly low level. Magic users would pretty much be decided at birth, after all; these aren’t the kind of spells a regular person could use.”

“To put it another way: a mage with enough mana could at least activate these spells, but anyone who’s not at that level is going to struggle to activate them, no matter how hard they try. And I don’t think someone starting with small mana reserves would train them up just for the chance of becoming a mage in the future. If they were going to go through all that hard work, they’d probably do better to devote it to the sword or something else instead. My point is, this magic is terrible; it’d be ludicrous to expect a beginner to train in it.”

Creston and Celestina were both in awe at the knowledge and observational powers the mage before them had shown.

Not only had he worked out the cause of Celestina's problem, which nobody else had been able to do, but he had found flaws in the spells themselves.

The pair were forced to admit that this man was an extraordinary mage, whether they had wanted to or not.

"Hmm... Wherever you look, there are all these pointless letters putting extra burden on the caster. The formulas themselves aren't balanced in a lot of places either. It's no wonder these aren't activating."

"Humph... And they call themselves magic researchers?! Spreading useless spells like this..."

"So...is there any way to make these spells easier to use?!"

"Sure. It's just a matter of taking out the parts you don't need, so it shouldn't be much effort."

"Please, could you do that for us?!"

"Yes! Please, if there's anything you can do that would let me use these spells!"

"A-All right!" Zelos was again surprised by the fire in the pair's eyes.

If this world worked the same as the game Zelos was used to, everybody should have the potential to use magic.

As long as you had a clear image, the right knowledge, and sufficient mana, things like magic formulas and sigils might have looked unnecessary. However, the more powerful the spell, the more time and mana it took to activate, and the more likely it became that the spell would fail.

Mana responded to a caster's mind, meaning that even the slightest fluctuation in one's focus could cause a spell to fail at a crucial point.

Magic formulas were made to prevent that, and had then been further iterated on to create sigils. But even with both of those improvements, it was still relatively common for spells to fail, which had led to the next innovation of installing spells within one's subconscious—bringing us to the current day.

Celestina's inability to use magic, as such, was caused by both her relative lack of mana and the burden put on her by incomplete sigils. It was typically possible to train and increase one's mana pool by casting basic spells, and so simply training as a mage would allow a person to build up more mana over time.

However, if that was still not enough for a spell to activate, the blame would fall squarely upon an incomplete sigil that required too much mana.

Mana's tendency to be influenced by the user's mind then only complicated matters further. If some sort of trauma had given someone the idea they "couldn't use magic," remembering that could cause major fluctuations in their mana, placing yet another shackle on their spellcasting ability.

In broader terms, it was the same as a child being told at a young age that they'd never amount to anything, believing it, and growing up as a failure of a person. The point being that one's mental state—including any assumptions they had internalized—could affect their abilities. Combined with various other factors, it prevented this girl from casting magic.

Faulty magic formulas had shut the doors on her inherent potential, creating a vicious cycle wherein she had convinced herself of her ineptitude and had become less capable as a result.

Long story short, the magic formulas in Celestina's textbook were unfit for teaching. They threatened to strip away the potential of those who had what it took to become brilliant mages.

"So, well, that's about how it is, as far as I can see. If you can fix even one of those problems, you should be able to use magic. Probably."

The old noble spoke up. "I'm still a little worried about a few things, but...shall we give it a try?"

"Yes! You're saying I should become able to cast spells if I can fix any of those problems you mentioned, right?"

"Most likely. In the first place, magic formulas and sigils are meant to help the caster and let them use spells more smoothly, so I can't promise anything for sure until we try. Still, I'll try and do what I can. Let's get to it..."

Zelos leafed through the book of spells, eyes scanning over the magic

formulas it contained.

Whatever each spell was meant to do, it was clear that their formulas were all off in one way or another. He also needed to see how much these problems extended to the sigils.

Donning the serious, focused expression of a programmer—something that he had almost forgotten—Zelos started to unravel the formulas within the textbook and investigate the sigils they formed.

His eyes, hidden behind his bangs, were narrowed to slits. Truth be told, it was a rather scary look.

*

And so, the middle-aged man—once Satoshi Osako, now Zelos Merlin—got stuck in debugging, working to optimize the magic formulas in the book. As he didn't have time to rewrite the entire thing, he decided to modify only the basic spells.

Later, the mages who had created this textbook would all be fired from their jobs and exiled from the country. But that had nothing to do with Zelos.

And so began the legend of a middle-aged man who would come to be known—for real this time—as a Great Sage.

Chapter 3: The Old Guy Solves a Girl's Problem

The horse-drawn carriage slowly made its way along the path, jostling Zelos around as he unraveled the magic formulas in Celestina's textbook. He worked to remove any unnecessary parts from the formulas while also adding in parts that were needed for them to work properly.

As he worked, the formulas sprang from the textbook to float in midair inside the carriage—it was quite a spectacular sight. Some letters disappeared and others were added, changing the formulas into different shapes as the time went by. The whole process was unbelievably fast—and for Celestina, it was entirely new, something she'd never experienced the likes of before. Her eyes shone bright with amazement.

Her grandfather Creston, meanwhile, was overjoyed to see such light in his granddaughter's eyes. He silently thanked the gods for his meeting with Zelos.

In spite of that, he didn't actually *believe* in the gods—mages, by nature, tended to be the logical, skeptical type.

Humans truly were a fickle species.

"Okay, I've finished taking a quick look through. Now it's time to try things out. Shall we give it a shot?"

"This one is...Torch?"

"Mm hmm. It's a fairly basic spell that anyone should be able to use, so I chose that as the first one to simplify. For the most part, I just reduced its mana consumption, and changed it so that it could use external mana."

"Whatever do you mean by 'external mana'?" Creston chimed in.

"You can think of it as the flow of mana that builds up in nature over time. You can use your own mana to call on it, then spend *that* instead of your own mana to activate a magic formula. It seems like all the formulas written in here only use the caster's own mana for everything; that puts a huge burden on any mages trying to use them."

“I’m not sure I follow. Isn’t being a mage all about using the mana in your body to reshape matter and make things happen?”

“Hmm... You’re not exactly wrong, but you’re not entirely right either. Formulas really only exist to help casters use the mana that’s out there in nature; if you’re just spending your own mana to activate spells, you’ll use it all up in no time. And end up ‘out of mana,’ as they say.”

Zelos was starting to realize that this world’s understanding of magic was leagues behind where things had been in *Swords & Sorceries*.

Nature contained a fixed amount of mana; even if it got converted into a different form, it wouldn’t take long to turn back into pure mana and disperse. While you could use magic to change it, only its *properties* would change—the mana itself would still exist, as it always had, and it would eventually revert back to its natural form. Changing the properties of mana allowed casters to inflict attacks on enemies, as well as protect themselves from the attacks of others. That was how magic worked. Some spells could interfere with a person’s mind, but those worked by keeping one’s internal mana in a modified state, and even then the spell would eventually fade.

In other words, mana would always try to turn back into its base form, similar to how real-world materials could return to their original shape after being deformed. However, when a caster let their internal mana out of their body, it would take some time to return, during which the caster’s body could experience abnormalities. The norm, as such, was to use one’s internal mana just as a catalyst to tap into external mana, ultimately minimizing the amount of internal mana consumed—and magic formulas had been made to boost the efficiency of that process. Yet despite the fact that there should have been mages in this world conducting research into magic formulas, there were all these defective spells being taught to people. Zelos found it strange.

“Well, whether it’s a coincidence or intentional, I can say without doubt that these magic formulas are full of flaws.”

“I never would’ve thought someone could tell so much just from looking at the formulas. You’re amazing!”

“Such a talented man. You truly have no interest in working for a country?”

Your genius will be all for naught!”

“I have some reasons that I can’t exactly explain... But really, the main one is that I don’t want to get turned into a pawn in someone’s political ambitions. I’d rather not have people potentially coming after my life for whatever reason, and I’d like to avoid getting caught up in any other sort of trouble as well.”

There was a strong expectation that any mage serving a country would have absolute obedience to their master, even over that country’s king.

Even if such a mage were to develop incredibly useful spells, the future of those spells would depend entirely on the mage’s master; any disapproval would put a stop to their research. Some of the greedier masters were also known to steal the research results of those who worked for them. Zelos absolutely refused, with every fiber of his being, to throw in his lot with those sorts of people—and as long as he needed to live in this world, he wanted nothing to do with needless conflicts.

If light novels were anything to go by, those kinds of people would be a dime a dozen in the upper ranks of society. Even real-world history had no shortage of unscrupulous people in positions of power.

It seemed entirely likely, then, that Zelos’s new reality would have some of those types lurking around as well.

“You’re not wrong; that *is* something to consider. Mages nowadays will take someone’s research and present it as their own, and try to justify it by saying the researcher was part of their faction. Of course, the instant someone finds anything *wrong* with that research, the responsibility is all of a sudden thrown back onto the researcher themselves...”

“I suppose that’s why most mages only pass on their magic formulas to their successors,” Celestina chimed in. “But then again, if you don’t *have* a successor, wouldn’t that mean that all of the magic you researched could simply end up vanishing? Are you okay with that, Zelos?”

“A lot of what I’ve researched is pretty dangerous—it’s not the kind of stuff I’d want to teach to people willy-nilly in the first place. I also don’t know whether too many people would even understand it... Really, though, I wouldn’t even mind if it just faded away into history. In fact, that might be for

the best; it's all stuff that'd be dangerous to teach people. And magic research is mostly just a hobby for me, after all."

The spells Zelos had created during his time in *Swords & Sorceries* were highly dangerous—and having now seen in person the sort of devastation they could cause, he couldn't just go around teaching them to people. Not to mention, this world's study of magic was woefully underdeveloped anyway.

For example, this world considered the pinnacle of fire magic to be something known as "blue flame"—yet all that involved was having a mage combust more air than usual and use it to fuel higher temperatures. It was an incredibly simple physical phenomenon—nothing to write home about.

That could hardly compare to something like Zelos's Dark Lightning Concerto. By compressing mana, this spell created gravitational fields that warped light itself—and the instant these fields pierced through an enemy, they would convert themselves into energy, burning the enemy to ashes from within.

While it consisted of just small projectiles capable of instantly shifting their form, the spell's properties and effects—enabled by the extreme changes it made to the form of mana—boosted its force and attack power to unthinkable levels. It was a brutal, vicious spell. Its magic formula, meanwhile, had quite the volume to it, and was so detailed that deciphering it would seem impossible, let alone fully understanding it.

"My point is, if I go around carelessly teaching this sort of magic, I'll have no idea what it could be used for. If I'm using it myself, that's one thing; the responsibility's on me there. But I'm worried about it being used for war if some country gets its hands on it..."

"Ah. From what you're saying, that certainly does sound like it would be rather risky. I cannot say just how dangerous this magic of yours is, but from what I *do* know, I can only imagine it causing horrific carnage should it be used in conflict."

"Yes. If you make a mistake, a lot of people could end up paying with their lives. Even just thinking about it is scary..."

"I wouldn't mind teaching people some of the basics, at least as far as they'd be able to understand. But the actual full spells I use are too dangerous. Too

vicious. I'd rather not pass that sort of knowledge on to anyone else."

"A wise decision. How I wish some certain fools in my family would learn from your example..."

"Okay, I've finished optimizing two spells. Would you like to give them a try?"

"What?! How did you finish so fast?"

Textbook or not, it was entirely possible for a third party to modify the contents of a spell book.

Spell books used magic paper and special ink to depict magic formulas, and mages could send mana into those formulas to make them fly off the page and float in midair. It was then possible to use the Mana Control skill to manipulate the magic letters and modify the spell. Mages could also etch the sigil associated with a spell's formula into their subconscious.

If Celestina embedded Zelos's rewritten magic formula into her subconscious, she would be able to use the spell as well. A carriage, however, was too narrow a place to try out most spells.

"It's these two spells here—Fire and Torch. You should start with the latter of those, of course; Fire is obviously too dangerous to use inside a carriage. If you can keep the light at a consistent level for long enough, you should be able to learn Mana Control."

"'Mana Control'? What's that? Is it a skill of some sort?"

"Yes, pretty much. Once you've learned it, you should be able to create a little ball of fire with magic and keep it like that for a certain amount of time. Then when you've properly got the hang of it, you'll be able to purposefully cancel any magic you've activated; it's very convenient. An essential skill for mages. If you get good enough at it, you should be able to cast spells without an incantation too, and probably rewrite magic formulas yourself."

"Ah, yes. The basics. Tina hasn't been able to do any of that so far, after all."

"Even if you send an attack flying off in the wrong direction, being able to control your magic means you can redirect it toward an enemy without the attack losing its power. Doesn't work for area attacks, though."

“So you’re saying that...” Celestina paused for a moment, trying to put together the right words. “You can learn to take a spell you’ve already released and control it however you want?”

“Essentially, yeah. Magic can’t sustain itself for too long, though, so you can only do it for as long as the spell’s manifested.”

“Still! That’s amazing!”

Eyes shining like gemstones, Celestina pulled closer to Zelos.

The sight warmed Creston’s heart like little he’d ever seen before—all the same, he shot a jealous look at the foreign mage.

There was a lot going on in the old man’s mind.

“Anyway, let’s start with Torch for now. The goal is to improve your mana control—ideally until you’re able to use magic without an incantation.”

“Okay! I’ll give it my best shot!”

Nodding her head enthusiastically, Celestina got to work on embedding the improved magic formula into her subconscious. A mage could place their hand on a spell book and send mana into it to make a spell’s formula manifest—and that formula could then be used, with the mage’s internal mana as a mediator, to embed the spell into their subconscious. While external mana would dissipate in no time at all, living beings would always have some level of internal mana as long as they were alive, so they could rely on formulas embedded in this way remaining even if they were “out of mana.”

Living beings in this world constantly generated mana, and going about various activities would see that mana course through their cells and be consumed. But even if a person’s mana pool ran dry, it would only mean that they had lost the portion of their mana used to cast spells; the body would keep enough aside to stay alive.

In a sense, you could say that in this world an individual’s mana was equivalent to their life force itself.

While some mages might wield magic recklessly and lose their lives in the process, this could be chalked up to a combination of imperfect magic formulas

and the fact that the mages themselves were acting so rashly as to damage their own bodies.

If what Zelos had experienced in *Swords & Sorceries*—and what he knew from the game’s setting—differed somehow in this world, then it was entirely possible that any careless move could result in him blowing himself up, or crippling him for life if he was lucky. And while he wasn’t aware, secret experiments along those lines were carried out on prisoners, all in the pursuit of brutal research that would remain well out of the history books.

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“I should be ready. Okay... *Burn before me, torchlight. Illuminate my path. Torch!*”

A small sigil appeared at the tip of Celestina’s finger, lighting a tiny flame in the air.

It was a little too weak to be considered a proper Torch—yet it was clear that Celestina had managed to activate the spell.

“I did it, Grandfather! I actually managed to use magic! I can hardly believe it!”

“Ahh... You really did! I’m so happy for you, Tina...”

“The flame’s only around as strong as a candle’s, but I guess that’s about right for your first time activating magic. If you can keep it at about the same size it is now, you’ll gradually get the hang of controlling your mana.”

“I’ll give it a try. Ah— Ahhh! It went out!”

“Keeping your mana at a constant trickle can be hard—and remember, even a little bit of wind can make the flame go out. You’ll probably need to concentrate.”

“This time the flame’s too big! *Ahhh!* This is hard!”

“Well, that’s the kind of training this is. The main thing is just to get used to it, then keep it up until you run out of mana, I guess. Your mana will come back once you rest—and then you can practice again, so it shouldn’t really be a problem.”

As in the game, it was possible to look at status screens in this world, so the world's inhabitants could use the screen to check their own skills. You could raise your level and get stronger by fighting monsters—but that would likely be a bit much to ask of a young girl like Celestina.

In which case, the important thing would be for her to learn skills and improve her control manually.

Consuming mana would increase her total mana pool, even if just by a little bit—and in the process, she'd be able to learn skills as well, killing two birds with one stone. Keeping up this training would then let her increase the level of those skills.

"Hmm. It seems like a well-considered training regime, but this would require her to practice every day, would it not?"

"Yes, it will. After all, keeping up with training is the only way to see results—so she'll need to take it to heart and make it part of her daily routine. But once she's learned the skill, she'll be able to build on it and start getting stronger. It's essential training for any mage."

"I'll do it! I was finally able to use magic, so I won't let something like that stop me!"

"Tina's really fired up... How long has it been since I saw her so determined? Aaaahhhh..."

Emotions were welling up within the old noble as well. There was nothing wrong with being a doting grandfather, but he could get a bit too carried away with it at times.

"If you can learn body-strengthening magic and keep casting that on yourself, you should be able to get the same effect as now while also learning the Magic Resistance skill. I can't say for sure; it's been quite a while since I did it, so I'm always forgetting the specifics. I *think* that's how it worked, though. Hmm..."

"I want to do that too!"

"I thought that'd be the case—so the second spell I'd recommend for you is Physical Enhancement. You might want to build up your mana a little bit before trying it out, though. It uses more mana than Torch, so I think you'd get tired

pretty quickly if you tried to use it now.”

Zelos used Appraisal to take a look at the girl’s status screen.

*

Celestina von Solistia (Level 5)

HP: 125 / 125

MP: 121 / 140

Job: Noble Girl

Skills:

Fire Magic (1 / 100)

Personal skills:

Perseverance (50 / 100)

Individual skills:

Patience (50 / 100)

*

Celestina’s mana was gradually ticking its way toward zero as she used it up.

The sheer fact that this was magic training, however, made the struggle a very welcome one for the girl. After all, she’d never been able to use magic until now. Now that she’d been pulled out of that slump, she was tackling the training with glee.

And as a result, she was so happy she could scarcely contain herself.

Not that it really matters, but I notice she’s got quite a high level on her Perseverance and Patience skills. I guess she must’ve had a really tough time of things...

Satoshi was thinking over the girl’s stats as he worked to optimize the magic formulas in the textbook.

Celestina was a rather pitiable girl; she wasn't even considered a proper noble most of the time. Of course, that wasn't something Zelos knew—but he was able to at least make some guesses based on the girl's status screen.

“Okay, page twenty-seven... ‘Ice Lance,’ huh?”

“Already?!” Celestina and her grandfather shouted out in unison, stunned by Zelos's speed.

The core part of any basic spell's magic formula was protected, so all that was left for Zelos to do was remove any unnecessary parts and incorporate some simple formulas for mana control. Having been a programmer at one point, Zelos was rather proficient at this sort of work, and he was humming as he went.

“Okay—how about a little contest? To see whether I finish improving the formulas in this textbook first, or you manage to use up all your mana first?”

“I-I won't lose!”

“I feel like you may be putting yourself at a slight disadvantage here, Zelos...but, pah. This could be interesting nonetheless.”

Creston honestly didn't care who was going to win this little challenge. He was simply basking in the joy of seeing a smile plastered across his granddaughter's face for the first time in what felt like forever.

*

Ultimately, Zelos was faster—but he intentionally slowed down a bit toward the end, letting Celestina take the win.

Like any average middle-aged man, he had a soft spot for kids.

Creston, meanwhile, was beaming to see his granddaughter so overjoyed.

Adults simply couldn't help themselves at a time like this.

*

“Bread! They have *BREAD!*”

As the travelers set up camp at a rest site, Zelos began crying tears of joy at the sight of mere bread.

Over the past week, he'd had to survive in a vast forest, eating nothing but meat, meat, and more meat. So seeing this loaf spurred deep emotions in the man; tears welled in his eyes. He'd had seasonings, but no rations to season—leaving him with a purely carnivorous diet that he'd tired of quickly, having been stuck with it for days on end.

Before him now, however, was the first food he'd seen in quite a while that promised civilized human tastes.

“Truly, *this* has brought you to tears? What sort of life have you been living until now, my good man? Truth be told, I fear to ask...”

“I was lost in the forest for a whole week; there were monsters coming after me every day. I wasn't able to eat anything but meat. Ugh, I'm so glad I made it out of there alive...”

“What forest do you speak of? I can scarcely imagine one so harsh! Or was it an ascetic journey of some sort?”

“I couldn't say; I don't actually know what the forest's name was. The wyvern that came after me was a real tough one to deal with, though. And on an empty stomach, to boot...” Satoshi chuckled to himself for a moment. “That sure was one persistent lizard.”

“A *wyvern*?!” A gasp of shock came ringing out in unison from four directions—spouting forth from not only Celestina and her grandfather but also the two knights, who remained at the front of the carriage.

“How'd ya manage to get away from a *wyvern*?!”

“Don't tell me you *beat* it!”

“If you did...that would make you a dragonslayer! Why, you could almost be called a champion!”

“Please, could you tell us about your adventures?”

“Calling me a dragonslayer feels like an exaggeration. A wyvern's pretty much just a flying lizard, right? They're not *that* hard to beat, once you get used to it.”

“That's insane!” Again, all four spoke in unison.

Wyverns were also known as “the devils of the sky.” Once they spotted their

prey from the sky, they would pursue it relentlessly. They also flew with incredible speed, and were smart enough to anticipate your next move.

To top it all off, it wasn't rare for them to move in packs. The end result was that many mercenaries who took on wyvern quests tended to wind up dead themselves, the creature having turned the tables on them.

Wyvern meat, by the way, was considered a delectable gourmet ingredient, or so the others told him.

"A gourmet ingredient, huh? I've got about seven wyverns' worth—how much do you think it'd sell for? There's no way I could finish it all by myself, so I've been wondering what to do with it. I mean, it *is* tasty, so I'll leave a *bit* for myself, but still."

"S-So he really *did* manage to kill them. What a monster..."

"Are you serious? We're talking about the devils of the sky here! They're not the kind of monster you can just beat like that!"

"So this is what a high-ranked mage can do... I never would've thought a single person could have so much power! I'm amazed!"

"I would gladly purchase some of that meat from you! But really, what in the world is this strength of yours?"

"Hmm? Come on, a wyvern's not as bad as a behemoth, right? If you know what you're doing, you can defeat one without too much of a problem..."

"A *behemoth*?!" Celestina, Creston, and the two knights were starting to make a habit out of speaking in unison.

"Those are the ultimate monsters!"

"They're classed as calamities!" Well, now that he'd drawn all this attention to himself, Zelos decided he had no choice but to tell the four his story so far.

Of course, most of the things in this story had happened to Zelos when he'd been just a character within a game. But he left out that little detail now—as well as the fact that he'd been reincarnated from Japan, or that he'd fought against the Dark God—and sprinkled in a few extra lies to smooth it all over.

The story went something like this: he, Zelos Merlin, had traveled around with

his parents from a young age, never knowing what country he'd been born in. And as he went, he had researched the ways of magic day and night, teaching himself all about the rules behind magic.

In his teens, Zelos told the enraptured group, he had gotten himself a job at a magic laboratory in one country or another, only to wind up fired before long. From there, he had become a mercenary specializing in magic, and he'd traveled all around the lands doing battle. Along the way, he had met four companions in circumstances similar to his own, and with them formed a five-man party that set out on a journey to master the pursuit of magic. They would throw themselves into all sorts of ruthless battles, in which they would test out the spells they had made, then refine them before heading back into battle again, creating a cycle that repeated day after day. Eventually, however, each of the five had either grown tired of that routine or found their own reasons to leave the party—and so Zelos had found himself alone again. By that point, he told his listeners, he had just wanted a place where he could live a normal life. So he had started searching for such a place, gotten lost along the way, and ended up stranded in a forest—from where the four already knew the rest of the story.

That was about the gist of it, at least. And upon hearing this story, his eager listeners rushed to react.

“So *that* explains your combat experience!” cried one of the knights. “I never would’ve expected to find a researcher with a story like that...”

“Sounds like we’ve been going about our training the wrong way. Those bandits earlier were about to get the better of us, after all...”

“It certainly sounds like a frightful tale, yes. Defeating a behemoth, though... It defies comprehension! And with only five people! Truly, you remain a mystery...”

“So you got that strong by fighting, Zelos? It sounds like I still have a long way to go,” Celestina put in.

Zelos replied, “Really, it’s nothing that amazing. Just the story of your regular old fool who’s made a mess of his life. Nothing all that sad in there either, surely...”

“‘Mastering the pursuit of magic’... Those truly do sound like the words of a fool. Still, I would love nothing more than to see the mages from around here show even a sliver of that mettle of yours...”

It seemed like Zelos’s little story had gotten them all to see him as somewhat of a champion. He’d hoped that it would go down well, but this was beyond what he’d intended.

Still, he was a man who’d been reincarnated from another world, with both his original body and all the benefits of his in-game character. So while those around him didn’t know that, they weren’t entirely wrong to think of him as some sort of spectacular existence.

Above all, it was undeniable that he’d routed the bandits with overwhelming force—meaning he had played a considerable role himself in lighting a fire of envy in the eyes of his listeners. Despite that, it wasn’t something he had expected.

“After hearing all that, I must admit I’m curious. How does your status screen look, my good man?”

“Are you sure you want to ask? You might, uh, prefer not knowing, okay? It’s kind of ridiculous, if I may say so myself.”

“So it’s *that* high? You’re not kidding, right?”

“If it’s as high as you’re implying, then... Huh. Maybe we might have to rethink the training regimen for the order of knights.”

“You seem like you could even be about Level 500! You do say you defeated wyverns, after all!”

“No, it’s, uh... It’s a bit higher than that. About three times higher. And then some...” He spoke quietly, as if embarrassed to utter the words.

“*Wh-Whaaaaaaaat?!*” Three voices bounced around the caravan.

Zelos’s level of 1,879 wasn’t just for show. The higher your level got, the longer it tended to take to reach the next one, and levels were said to cap out somewhere around 500. But if someone were to have really exceeded 1,000, all those assumptions would go flying out the window.

After all, Zelos had defeated the Dark God—which, as one might expect, had come with quite the reward. It had given an enormous amount of bonus experience, significantly increasing his level.

So with his newly reincarnated body based on such an overpowered game character, it was no surprise that Zelos was far beyond the realms of the ordinary.

“I assume your skills are fearsome as well. I would certainly be loath to make an enemy of you...”

“You’re probably right, sir. He doesn’t seem like the sort of person that even your magic would be able to handle.”

“It sounds like you’re powerful enough to destroy a country if you’re careless. To think a man like that actually exists...”

“Well, uh...now that you mention it, I’m not *technically* a mage. My actual job is ‘Great Sage.’ I don’t mind being called a mage, though, so can we keep that bit a secret?”

“Stop! Stop, already! I don’t even know what’s real any more!” More bewildered voices rang out in unison.

“Reality’s like that, you know. You can think something’s common sense, and then...boom. It’s flipped on its head. Anyway—how about some food?”

Dinner that night was an unusually quiet affair.

With the exception, that is, of one man, who was crying as he munched on his bread.

“Oh, it’s been so *long* since I had bread! To think eating it could feel this good... I’m so happy I’m still *aliiiive*!”

The almighty Great Sage had been longing for a more diverse diet.

Watching on, the ducal party was bewildered by the man, who seemed to have more surprises for them with every passing minute.

*

When Zelos awoke the next morning, Celestina was already training her mana

control.

The girl was now facing the study of magic head-on, as if a set of heavy shackles had been finally removed from her body.

Truth be told, she had spent the last night drumming into her mind all of the magic formulas Zelos had modified, and was now experimenting by herself to find out which ones she could use. Basic though they might have been, the attack spells in that selection required a lot of mana compared to what Celestina had access to right now, placing a heavy burden on the girl. And to that end, she was keeping up her practice, aiming to learn both the Mana Control skill—which would reduce the amount of mana she needed to consume—as well as the Magic Resistance skill.

Pursuing both of these skills at the same time required a considerable amount of both mana and practice, and it was harder than learning either one separately; it brought to mind the saying that “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Due to that and other factors, most mages would’ve leveled up a bit first to increase their mana pool and begun training in earnest only after that. But leveling like that was difficult for those who, like Celestina, had been born to a noble family—and even if she did look to head straight into battle and level up, she’d be lacking in mana, only able to fire off an attack spell two or three times at best.

There was also the option of defeating a high-level monster, which could provide a rapid boost to one’s own level. Going straight for that seemed too risky at the moment, however.

Even if Celestina *did* manage to expand her mana pool, it would only require her to use more powerful magic in her training.

Getting more mana also meant making it harder to run out of mana, so if Celestina wanted to continue her training at that point, she’d need to learn spells that could consume more mana. The most efficient spells to that end were attack magic—but of course, it wasn’t as if she could just fire those off at random.

Long story short, the training method she was using at the moment would inevitably reach a standstill before long.

“Already getting started on your training, huh? Good job. Still, make sure to take care of yourself so you don’t collapse, okay?”

“Oh, Master!”

“M-Master?”

“Yes! You’re teaching me magic, so I called you Master. Would you rather I not?”

“Well...I suppose I don’t mind. I really don’t think I’m doing enough to deserve it, though...”

“No! You’ve done more than enough for me. I can finally start to move forward now!”

Without even realizing it, Zelos had made a huge impact on this girl’s life.

Somewhat at a loss for words, he gave her an uneasy smile, running a hand through his messy hair.

“This is the easy part, you know. Things are going to get a lot harder once you’ve learned the Mana Control skill! Sooner or later, you’ll have a hard time using up all your mana...”

“Still—it’s better to do something than nothing, right? I want to be a mage like you!”

“Hmm. I think that might be going a little too far. It’s good that you’ve got a goal, I suppose, but why me? I see myself as being something of a good-for-nothing mage, you know...”

*

Zelos still wasn’t fully aware of just how far he sat outside the norm.

In his mind, he mostly saw his strength as a matter of “Hey, this feels like cheating! It’s not really the sort of thing to be proud about.” But from Celestina’s perspective, he was a Sage leagues beyond any of the country’s mages, and both an expert and researcher on the topic of magic.

In essence, he was a brilliant and mighty enough magic user to inspire both envy and respect in those around him.

What was more, he had done a magnificent job resolving Celestina's own problem—and he had even rewritten flawed magic formulas into highly efficient ones as if it were child's play. At this point, the girl had just about begun to idolize him.

Zelos had shown Celestina the ideal of what a mage should be. The man himself, though, had absolutely no idea he had done so.

"If there's anything you're not sure about, I'd be happy to explain it to you. You'll have to be careful if you're going to create any spells, though. After all, if you mess up, you could end up hurting yourself *and* anyone around you. So you'll want to get your skills and your level up fairly high first before you try that out."

"I think it's still a bit too early for that right now. I'd love to reach those heights at some point in the future, though. I look forward to continuing to learn from you!"

"Huh? Hold on a moment. 'Continuing to learn from me'? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, did Grandfather not ask you about it yet? He said he was going to make a request for you to become my private tutor, so I was sure he would have gone into that with you by now..."

"Uh...no, he hasn't yet. Still, I guess it'd be better than unemployment."

In society's eyes, it was a bad look for a forty-year-old man to be unemployed. Plus, he was still hoping to get married—and with that in mind, it wouldn't hurt to have a stable job. Though of course, if he *really* wanted to get married, he should probably be doing something about his appearance first.

After all, from an outsider's perspective, he looked like nothing more than a slovenly middle-aged man.

"When you say 'private tutor'...about how long do you think you'd want me for?"

"Oh, let's see. Until around the end of my summer break, I suppose? I have to return to the academy in about two months' time..."

“The academy? Is that a school for mages?”

“Yes. It’s called the Istol Academy of Magic; noble children go there to learn how to become mages. There are a lot of factions and things, though...”

“Sounds like a difficult place to put up with. Honestly, I’m not sure I trust them to even teach magic properly. Based on the spells in that textbook you showed me, I feel like the level of education there must be pretty rough.”

“I’ve started to think the same thing since I met you. Is it really necessary for me to study there?”

“Based on how this sort of thing usually goes, I wonder whether it’s just a place for nobles to socialize and make connections. Leaving the magic itself as an afterthought...”

Zelos was slightly disturbed to think that the factions in this country extended all the way to children.

Forcing a system like that onto people who were in the most impressionable part of their lives seemed like a kind of brainwashing in the guise of education. Zelos didn’t have a very good feeling about it. And of course, he could assume that there was probably some mean-spirited bullying to contend with as well, placing even more stress on children of that age.

“Milady, run away!”

“It’s a blood bear!”

All of a sudden, the pair’s conversation was interrupted by the two knights running up in a panic.

Following behind them was a huge bear, roaring, its body covered in jet-black fur.

*

Blood Bear (Level 15)

HP: 600 / 600

MP: 103 / 103

*

“Please, Milady, run!”

“Steel Chainbind!”

GROHHHR?!

Zelos had used restraining magic to stop the blood bear right in its tracks—and he followed it up with an absurd suggestion.

“Celestina! Have you learned any attack spells yet?”

“Wha—?! I-I have, but...why do you ask?”

“How about you fire one off at the bear here to test it out? You could get some levels out of it if you’re lucky!”

“There’s no way that would work! With my magic, I’d be lucky to manage three casts, even if I went all out...”

“That’ll be plenty. *Demon’s Blessing!*”

Created by Zelos himself, Demon’s Blessing was a buff spell that provided a significant boost to the target’s magic attacks.

Casting this spell on his allies had allowed Zelos and his party to annihilate their foes time and time again. Providing an almost tenfold boost to the power of magic attacks for a short period, its extraordinary effectiveness had shattered the party’s preconceptions of common sense.

“I-In that case... *Crimson flames, burn my enemy! Fireball!*”

THWOOOOSH!

A thundering noise echoed throughout the area. Clouds of dust, swept up from the ground, raged about.

The spell had flared with the sort of power one would never expect from such basic magic—and now, the blood bear was engulfed in flames.

Shocked cries rang out. “*What?!?*”

They had, of course, come from Celestina and the two knights, all of them left dumbfounded by the force of the boosted spell.

“Okay, now just finish it off. Try a different spell this time.”

“S-Sure! Raging winds, sunder my foe! Air Cutter!”

Generally speaking, air magic didn't offer much firepower. The strengthened Air Cutter, however, split the blood bear clean in two. This level of power in air magic was normally unheard of.

After all, there was no way the Level 5 Celestina should have been able to defeat a Level 15 blood bear.

That common sense, however, had been flipped neatly on its head by Zelos's decidedly nonsensical magic.



“Hwah?!”

Zelos rushed over to catch Celestina, who had been struck by a sudden bout of dizziness and begun to fall to the ground.

Rapidly leveling up had induced a case of vertigo in the girl, who wasn't used to the sensation.

*

Celestina von Solistia (Level 11)

HP: 205 / 205

MP: 151 / 211

Skills:

Fire Magic (10 100), *Water Magic* (1 100), Air Magic (5 100), *Earth Magic* (1 100), Light Magic (1 100), *Dark Magic* (1 100)

Personal skills:

Mana Control (3 100), *Perseverance* (50 100)

Individual skills:

Patience (50 / 100)

*

“That actually gave you more levels than I was expecting. I wonder if you got bonus experience?”

Celestina's level had gone up multiple times at once. It was Zelos's first time seeing a level-up in person.

“You're all the way up to Level 11 now. It looks like that's increased your mana pool by quite a bit; you should be able to do a lot more now.”

“What? Did it really go up by a whole six levels?! I can't believe it!”

“They’re combat level-ups, so I suppose that makes sense. You were fighting an enemy of a higher level, after all.”

“I-I see...”

It seemed like it hadn’t really sunk in yet for Celestina. After all, her power had been increased by Zelos’s magic-boosting spell, and she’d only cast two spells in total. It was no surprise that she was confused.

Still, it was a fact that she’d defeated the blood bear—so her level had gone up.

“It’d be perfect if another one came out right now...”

Before Zelos could tempt fate any further, a chorus of voices, including those of the two knights, cried, “Don’t jinx it!”

As for what Creston was doing at around that time...

“I’m so happy for you, Tina! After all this time, you’ve managed to defeat a monster with your own two hands...”

He was hidden in the shadows behind the carriage, crying tears of joy. The man harbored a massive soft spot for his granddaughter, as always.

*

Afterward, the party got to dismantling the blood bear’s body and eating breakfast, then the carriage set off back down the road again. They were headed toward the biggest town in this area: Santor.

Chapter 4: The Old Guy Becomes a Freeloader

The carriage made its way along the road for three days. Eventually, Zelos could see a distant city coming into view through the window.

Since his arrival here, he'd spent a week wandering through a vast forest; he'd finally escaped onto a highway, only to run into bandits. His only real human interaction this whole time had been with Creston, Celestina, and the two knights.

Now, however, the distant city—coming into sight as the carriage rolled its way down a hill—promised Zelos his first taste of civilized living in a while.

“So that’s Santor. It’s...” He paused for a moment. “It’s a little bigger than I was expecting, actually.”

“Good to hear! This is the largest settlement in my territory, and it’s an important hub for merchants. Most likely it’s the largest place you’ll find outside of the royal capital.”

“I notice there’s a big river too. I suppose there are a lot of people traveling by boat, then?”

“Indeed. That’s the Aurus River; sail down it for about two weeks, and you’ll arrive at the royal capital. It can be faster than traveling by land—though marine travel will always leave you somewhat at the mercy of the winds, so it oft makes little difference which way you go.”

Situated in a clearing between mountains and with a large river running just alongside it, the city of Santor had long been a strategic point for trade. Its location also made for good natural defenses, leading some to call it an impregnable fort.

While it had been caught up in many wars, the city had never once fallen; a great many enemies had perished around its perimeter. That had given the place another, less flattering name: “the City of Blood.”

Of course, this name was mostly used by foreign merchants whose countries

had tried to attack the city; it represented a growing realization that there was simply too much risk in trying to take the place over. Every king that had decided to attack the city had promptly been labeled a fool, and had ultimately commanded their troops to retreat from a losing battle, achieving nothing despite suffering a grievous number of casualties. This had even given rise to a saying: “A wise king leaves Santor well alone.” At the same time, the city placed significant importance on law and order, ensuring the safety of its own inhabitants. It had even become famous as the safest city in the world.

That was Santor—famous and infamous.

*

“You’ll see a gate at the foot of this hill. Beyond that lies my own private residence.”

“You said you’re retired, right? I’m not going to run into the current duke while I’m with you or anything, am I?”

“Hah! What need is there for a mage of your caliber to worry so about meeting a mere duke?”

“Honestly, I just feel like I might be better off not meeting him. I wouldn’t want him taking an interest in me and getting me caught up in some sort of trouble...”

“You truly are reluctant to avoid people of influence, aren’t you? I may be retired now, but I was a duke myself in my younger years, you know!”

“No, it’s not like that. I’d just rather not have them setting their sights on me. I’ve lived a fairly carefree life so far, I guess, and I’d like for that to stay the same—so I just want to make sure I don’t get caught up in the middle of some political power struggle, no matter how minor.”

“Certainly. I can understand your wish to stay out of trouble. And I must admit, I would feel rather guilty if you were to be pulled into some factional dispute while you were under my employ as Tina’s personal tutor. Now, I doubt whether even *he* would be quite so unreasonable as to do that to you...but yes, it may be for the best to avoid a meeting between the two of you if we can.”

Creston didn’t want to make any foolish choices, especially since he still didn’t

know the full extent of Zelos's power.

More importantly, the man was now teaching his adorable granddaughter. It wouldn't be a great idea to chain him down with responsibilities in a way that could encourage him to run away.

As long as Zelos was there, Creston could expect his granddaughter to keep smiling at him—and there was nothing more this retired old man could ask for. Everything he did was for the sake of his beloved Celestina.

“Okay, I need to weaken the flame a bit, and... Aww. I can't keep it steady...”

Celestina was in the middle of her mana control training, trying her best to keep fine control over the Torch spell.

She was hard at work, attempting all sorts of different things—like trying to weaken the flame while still keeping it alive, or intentionally making a bigger flame and trying to control that. Now that she was finally able to do what she couldn't before, she was fully immersed in her magic training.

Her earnest expression revealed her determination to make up for lost time—and yet, it was a look of real happiness.

*

“Ah, that's right; I had promised to grant you a plot of land. You said something about wanting somewhere quiet, yes?”

“Yeah. I'd like to also use it for experiments to develop new spells. Essentially, I'd want somewhere that has a decent amount of land and lets me be self-sufficient. Ideally it'd be a little bit out of town, but close enough that I could still make the round trip without much of a problem. But of course, I don't want to be too picky...”

“What are you saying? Retired though I may be, you saved a *duke*! I would hardly call your terms unreasonable.”

It might have been a reward, but Zelos felt awkward about being too fussy with his request. Still, at a bare minimum, he wanted a plot of land that would let him live his life as he wished. He didn't want to be drifting about with no real place to call home; he at least wanted a place where he could try to start an

ordinary family for himself. So if there was an opportunity to get himself such a place, he would gladly take it.

“By the way, I have quite a few magic stones. Where should I go to sell them? I stumbled into a town of goblins back in the forest, and I didn’t really have any option but to fight them all...”

“You... *Surely* this wouldn’t be the case, but don’t tell me the forest you were lost in was the Far-Flung Green Depths, of all places?”

“I can’t say. Whatever it’s called, though, the place was crammed full of orcs too, not just goblins. However many I defeated, more just kept coming. Ugh... I really got fed up with it by the end.”

“To think that there was someone who could come out of that wretched place alive... You truly are on a different level from my own countrymen. I can scarcely conjure up the words to describe you.”

The Far-Flung Green Depths ran alongside the Far-Flung Highway. Countless monsters lived within; it was the most terrible of places, its only rule survival of the fittest. It was so dangerous that it had developed a reputation of being impossible to come back from alive.

“It’s likely best for me to take the magic stones myself and sell them on your behalf to a specialist I know. Around how many would you say you have?”

“That’s a good question. All I can really say is it was too many to count. At the very least, it’s more than a hundred.”

“Why, you’re sitting on a fortune, then! Magic stones seldom drop from goblins around these parts, after all.”

Formed inside the bodies of monsters, magic stones would generally only drop from those that lived in places rich with natural mana. It was either that, or from monsters powerful enough to form the stones purely with their own internal mana—but defeating a monster of that sort would entail some real difficulty. One way or another, any monsters with magic stones inside them were powerful, and even a goblin’s strength could differ significantly depending on whether or not it had a magic stone.

The hobgoblins around this area, for example, were about on par with the

regular goblins in the Green Depths—which showed just how much of a difference the stones could make. That Zelos had destroyed an entire settlement of such goblins was yet another indicator of his absurd level of power.

“A specialist, huh? I’m assuming it’s a shop that makes magic tools? As a mage, I’m honestly kind of interested.”

“Yes. The creation of magic tools requires magic stones. And demand is always high, so I imagine they’ll want as many as they can get their hands on.”

“In that case, how about something like a wyvern’s magic stone?”

“I would expect it to cover your living expenses and more for quite some time! Magic stones from wyverns have an incredible amount of mana within them, after all. They’re the sort of thing that royals or other nobles would be eager to get their hands on.”

“Maybe I should keep those for myself, then. I don’t want it to turn into a big thing if I start selling them left and right...”

“A wise plan. Are you able to create your own magic tools as well?”

“It’s not something I do often, but yes. I don’t have the right facilities for it right now, so I might just make some things every now and then as a break from working the fields.”

His job as Great Sage wasn’t just for show.

Zelos wasn’t yet sure whether he’d be able to create things in this world in the same way he had in the game. All of the items he’d made before, however, had been stored inside his head as crafting recipes. Not to mention, he was able to manipulate metal using magic sigils, so he didn’t have to worry about burning himself.

The steps for magical transmuting had been etched inside his memory as well. All in all, then, he thought he would probably be able to create some things.

It was entirely likely, though, that his skills could come to be quite the annoyance for any proper artisans in town.

“It’s, uh, probably best I don’t sell anything I make. I don’t want to be

responsible for any craftsmen hanging themselves...”

“You’re quite the genius, but it seems like even that must come with its own set of troubles, hmm?”

The Great Sage might have been an awe-inspiring man, but for craftsmen, he promised to be nothing more than a pain in the butt.

After all, if Zelos were to slip up and create all-powerful magic tools, any other mages getting by as magic tool craftsmen could expect to be left with no business to feed themselves.

For his part, however, Zelos had no intention of becoming a household name. And so he resolved then and there: he would be keeping his creations to himself.

The carriage finally entered the city of Santor.

While there was a basic check at the city gates, this particular carriage bore the crest of the ducal family in charge of the city, allowing it to pass without issue.

“This is incredible. I’ve heard of entire cities being surrounded by castle walls, but never anything on this scale.”

“It’s an important location—a great many people come and go through Santor. It would hardly do to leave them vulnerable to attack, now, would it? Us nobles have a duty to protect the people, after all.”

“Do *all* of the nobles see the people that way? Or are there some who, I don’t know, say they have the ‘right of the lord’ or whatever and try to steal away women on their bridal night?”

“Alas, there are. One such man even leads the court mages—he is the highest-ranked mage around. It truly is lamentable.”

“Ah...so there really *are* those sorts of people. Why doesn’t the country punish them? Don’t they know it’s the common people who make countries function in the first place? Even without royals or nobles, your average citizen would get by just fine...”

“The country tolerates it because they are talented—though having now met you, I can see them as such no longer. Regardless, they are naught but narrow-minded philistines.”

A while back, when Creston had been searching for a brilliant mage to tutor Celestina, that same court mage had appeared before him. He was willing, he had said, to introduce Creston to a mage who could teach his granddaughter—but only if he would receive a pretty penny for it. Deciding that that would be a necessary sacrifice, Creston had prepared a payment for the man. But the mage who’d been introduced to him had ended up giving up on the tutoring partway without providing any reason—leaving Creston poorer and Celestina still unable to use magic.

Now, however, Celestina had been saved by some obscure mage from who-knew-where. This new mage was incredibly competent—if anything, *too* competent—and to top it all off, he seemed to have no interest whatsoever in political power.

It seemed wrong to even compare the two men. They were leagues apart in virtue and integrity: one of them a philistine clinging to political power and proclaiming his ambitions to climb to the top of society; the other scorning the very idea of such power, yet managing to become a man worthy of great esteem anyway.

“I wonder if Tina will ever reach those lofty heights...”

“That’ll come down to talent and hard work, won’t it? It really depends on whether she can keep up this level of passion her whole life. Not to mention, everyone’s good at different things, and everyone grows up differently. So there’s no way of knowing just yet.”

“I suppose you are right. But I am worried that all of her hard work could one day go to waste...”

“Hard work helps people grow. And to me, at least, she seems like a very inquisitive girl—so she might end up having a lot of talent after all! Honestly, I’m just praying she doesn’t end up like me and dive into some sort of dangerous research on a whim.”

“Are you saying that you are the type to engage in dangerous research ‘on a

whim'? What a worrying researcher you are..."

Zelos was thinking back to the magic experiments he'd done in his online game. He had been reckless in a way unbecoming of his age, taking on all sorts of foolish endeavors and making a mess of things. Now, however, things were different; in this world, those foolish endeavors would be reality. Zelos didn't want to encourage a young girl to go down that kind of dangerous path.

After all, trying to emulate Zelos's dark past in reality would mean committing all sorts of atrocities...

With his mind filled with such thoughts of Celestina's future, Creston's carriage made its way farther into town.

*

The streets of Santor were lined with sturdy brick and mortar buildings. People were coming and going on the city streets as they went about their lives, creating a bustling cityscape full of energy.

At times, Creston's carriage passed by merchant carriages. Some revealed glimpses of armed passengers—mercenaries.

Yet while this was a broad main road, Creston's carriage seemed to be making its way into a forest.

"Why is there a forest here? Isn't this meant to be a fairly central part of the city?"

"Do you see that steep mountain ahead of us? It's surrounded by forest. And my home is in the middle of that forest—although my official residence as ruler of this territory is in the middle of the city."

"Whoa. It's almost like the city itself is a natural fort. It's surrounded by double-layered walls, the back's protected by mountains, and there's a big river out the front, as well as an incline; it must be hard to attack. Speaking of which, how do any merchants who come by boat get their cargo into the city?"

"Either they use pulleys to bring it up, or they take a slight detour to come through a separate passageway. We try to avoid making it difficult for them, of course; merchants are an incredibly important source of money for the city's

economy.”

“Yeah, I suppose the alternative would be high taxes—and I’m guessing the people might revolt if you took that too far.”

“We shall be quite all right as long as we avoid becoming too greedy, I assure you; we exercise a good deal of discretion on that front. Though as you suggest, Zelos, there is certainly no shortage of nobles under the misconception that taxes are their own spending money. Many, I am sure, will be taking taxes to form close relationships with merchants, or leaning on their authority to demand bribes, or indulging in every possible luxury.”

By comparison, the Duchy of Solistia was managed in a relatively fair manner.

“The problem is my son, who is more than willing to make use of his authority. He tends to get slightly carried away with it... Laying his hands on servant girls is one thing, but I have known him to do the same to other girls and even married women if he can find some way of justifying it to himself. The man is up to no good behind closed doors, I tell you that.”

“Let me guess—he says he’s just ‘a successful man who makes the most of what he’s got,’ or something like that?”

“He has brazenly said as much, right to my face! Can you believe it? To be frank, I cannot even begin to imagine how many grandchildren I might have. Just from what I know, he has laid his hands on some fifty women. It’s quite the issue.”

“I can see that leading to some nasty family disputes. He’d better have a clear will and decide on his successor before anything happens—or the family could end up with quite the problem on its hands. Though, well... I’m just saying that as someone who doesn’t want to get caught up in it all.”

“I know not who they are, but on occasion, girls have come to us demanding money. They’ve had no proof, however, so we’ve been able to turn them away quickly enough.”

To put it charitably, it sounded like the current duke was rather *actively* involved with the common people.

Zelos decided he should probably keep his guard up around the family if he

wanted to avoid getting pulled into any disputes over inheritance.

“Ah, here we go. You should be able to see it now.”

“Whoa. That building’s got some real medieval vibes. Never would’ve thought I’d be staying in a noble’s mansion one day...”

Creston spent most of his time living not in the official ducal residence, but in this small, plain-looking castle, nestled away in a different part of the city. Balconies could be seen jutting out from the castle here and there, but there were no signs of extravagance—no sculptures, no gold trim.

The carriage made its way across a bridge, which provided passage over a moat that had been dug around the castle to keep attackers out. And as they passed through the gates, what seemed like a whole new world opened up around Zelos. It was the perfect image of an old castle in the forest; the whole place gave off a quiet, quaint vibe befitting its forested surroundings.

“Over there, are those...gardens? No—fields?”

“Fields, yes. We grow most of our own vegetables here. The majority of our meat is brought in from outside of the premises, though we do also raise chickens in another part of the castle.”

“Those are some pretty big fields. Let me help out with some of the farmwork later, please! I might not look it, but I’m fairly decent at farming.”

“There is good reason for their size—a noble lifestyle isn’t as lucrative as you might expect. Keeping the territory running involves all sorts of expenses; all we truly need ourselves is enough to keep our appearances presentable for the role. Being self-sufficient like this is one way of minimizing the amount of money we need to waste on ourselves.”

“They certainly look like they should yield plenty of food. Anyway, they seem like great fields. I’m excited to see what you have growing there.”

For a duke’s residence, the castle itself wasn’t all that large, and most of it was taken up by gardens and fields.

Zelos thought it reflected rather well on the old noble. It showed a kind of grace, a willingness to shed the trappings of political power in his later years.

His opinion of Creston was starting to improve.

“Tina, my dear, we’ve arrived.”

“Hmm? Already? I still have some mana left...”

“You’ll need to carry your own luggage, all right? The servants are busy with their work.”

“Yes, Grandfather.”

It seemed that the old man could be surprisingly strict on his granddaughter at times. Still, the knowledge that the one before Zelos was a duke—albeit a former one—made it all come across as a somewhat heartwarming family interaction.

“Now, let us prepare a room for you. We will have to talk about your plans for tomorrow onward as well.”

“For the tutoring, you mean? Well, I’ll teach her as best I can, but it’ll be up to Celestina herself to decide what sort of mage she wants to be in the future—and to put in the work toward it.”

“That will be fine. I do not intend to restrict you, nor to make an enemy of you.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

For a mage to be capable of defeating a wyvern by himself was unheard of—and seeing that he was also rather skilled with the sword, he would surely be in high demand. That he was a free spirit, uninterested in climbing the ladder of political power, was the cherry on top.

Whatever the case, Creston wanted to avoid foisting unnecessary responsibilities onto Zelos; it simply wouldn’t do to have him run off out of frustration and live in some enemy nation instead. And Creston as an individual wanted cordial, friendly relations with the man anyway. He determined, then, that any talk of politics and power would be taboo, something best avoided at all costs.

“By the way, Master, do you not have a staff?”

“You’re right—while I do still use a medium for activating my magic, it’s not a

staff. I use a ring instead. That way my hands are free to swing my swords.”

“Oh? A ring? Is it made of mithril, then?”

“No, it’s made from the gallstones of a metal gradoth. They’re harder than mithril, but they still behave like metal, so they’re easy to work with. The main thing, though, is that they’ve got incredibly high magic conductivity.”

“That said,” Zelos continued, “they actually are *derived* from mithril. Mithril builds up in the creature’s gallstones over time, and it starts to take on special properties while it’s in there. So I don’t think using the gallstones would be all *that* different from using mithril itself.”

The metal gradoth was a type of creature that lived in volcanic areas and ate metal—and it was well-known that you could retrieve all sorts of metals from their innards. Any minerals the creature consumed would remain in its body and be used to form its scales, which were themselves considered valuable resources. However, the creatures were also very dangerous. They were a frighteningly strong and tough type of dragon, and they were largely impervious to attacks made by weapons.

What was more, they were aggressive enough to fight among themselves over territory, and they were merciless about killing off any intruders.

While they weren’t able to fly, they were nonetheless a far more fearsome monster than the wyvern.

Creston spoke up, amazed by Zelos’s description. “Frankly, I’m afraid to even ask what kind of creature could have driven back a man as powerful as yourself. But it truly does sound like you have had a brutal life; it makes sense that you would long to live the rest of it in peace.”

“You’re entirely right. Honestly, I’ve been in far too many battles over the years. So while it probably doesn’t *sound* like much when I say I want to live a quiet life...I think I feel that about as strongly as, say, an ambitious man feels his own desire to rule over an entire continent or something.”

“The sad part is that I can believe you when you say that. Living such a chaotic life would tire anybody out, of that I am sure.”

Creston had bought into Zelos’s tale even more than Zelos had been

expecting.

For Zelos, this “backstory” was something he had experienced as mere fiction, kicking back and wreaking havoc in a video game. But of course, talking to the people of this world, it would be best for him to leave that part out and act as if his whole story—from the start until the present day—had happened here.

The issue with that was that all of the battles he could remember “fighting” were incredibly brutal ones. Yet it seemed as if that had only helped to lend credence to his story, further convincing everyone that he was a mage who had gotten tired of spending his whole life in battle.

“By the way—where are your belongings? I thought it rather odd to see you traveling so light.”

“Oh, I can use space-time magic. It acts as kind of a special space to keep my things in.”

“That certainly sounds convenient. And here I thought that space-time magic was merely the stuff of legends...”

“Well, all I’m doing with it is storing my luggage, really. It’s useful when I’m traveling, but it’s not particularly efficient.”

“Could you not rewrite the magic to improve it?”

“It’s a fairly old spell, so the formula’s very different from what I’m used to. I can’t decipher it. I was thinking of spending my remaining years trying to figure out how it works, though.”

“So it’s a kind of ancient magic? You truly must have led a tremendous life, to have uncovered that sort of thing.”

The truth was, Zelos was just using the inventory system from the game. He didn’t have the slightest idea of how it was meant to work in this world. Passing it off as ancient magic was just a convenient way to have Creston accept the situation for what it was.

“Would you be able to reproduce that magic, by any chance?”

“The formula’s far too dense, unfortunately. I can’t do anything with it. Not to mention, even the letters look different from what I’m used to, so I can’t

decipher it. And it seems to have some kind of safeguard function built into it too—so once you embed it into your subconscious, you can't reproduce it."

"Where on earth did you even find such a spell? Would there perhaps be more like it out there?"

"I was just fighting on a battlefield one day when the ground collapsed under me for some reason. I ended up wandering around some underground place, fighting monsters as I went, and eventually I found a spell scroll in a little room. Trying to actually get out of that place was kind of a dance with death; I can't remember exactly what happened, but before I realized, I was walking through the mountains alone."

"For about a week after that," Zelos continued, "I was completely exhausted. I couldn't even get out of bed. And when I finally came back to my senses, I found myself in a carriage with my companions, on our way to another battlefield. Really, though, my memories from back then are still pretty foggy."

"I should not have asked. Just how many harsh things have you seen on your travels around this world...?"

The whole story was, of course, a bucket of lies. Zelos had figured that if he made things sound bad enough, the others wouldn't try to pry too much further—and yet Celestina's eyes were now wide open, sparkling with respect and amazement.

The purity of the girl's gaze left him feeling terribly guilty about it all. His lies were weighing heavily on his conscience.

It was all a good example of how different people could reach different conclusions from the same story.

Regardless, Zelos followed up the story by explaining some basic training methods that were essential to any mage—a discussion that continued as the group made their way into the residence proper.

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The entrance hall had a high ceiling, with a refined-looking chandelier hanging down to light the area.

A scant few paintings adorned the walls—and some flowers, sitting in vases with just a token effort of decoration, gave some indication as to the personality of the castle's master. Unnecessary furnishings were kept to a minimum.

Still, that in and of itself gave the place an artistic sensibility of sorts. It seemed appropriate for an old castle inside a forest.

"We'll be putting away our luggage for a while, so I'll have a retainer show you to your room."

"Thanks for all the help."

"This much is only natural—you *are* the man who saved our lives! Please, do try to feel at home here. Do not hold back on our behalf."

"I'll take you up on that, then. Thank you. I haven't been able to eat and sleep anywhere with a roof for a while, so honestly, this feels like an incredible level of hospitality."

"You certainly have had a rough time of it all, have you not? Ohh..."

Creston had been moved to tears.

"I shall prepare you a change of clothes. But first, I will have you shown to your bedroom."

"As long as it has a roof, I'll be happy anywhere—even a stable. I'm just looking forward to my first good night of sleep in a while."

"I can scarcely imagine the kinds of difficulties you must have faced. What has even conspired to bring so much hardship upon a single man?"

"Who knows? One way or another, though, I've gotten used to just finding myself surrounded by monsters all of a sudden. I've never even really thought about it all that much."

"Truly, what a cruel life. Even if it were all some kind of trial from the gods, I would say they have been too harsh on you, my good man."

"Well, I *do* think of the gods as my enemies. So perhaps it's all been some kind of divine punishment?"

In truth, it was the goddesses who had essentially kicked off the chain of events that had killed Zelos—or Satoshi, as he'd been known back then. It was no surprise that he saw them as his enemies.

“I’ll be excusing myself here. I may be retired, yet I still find myself with work to do, after all...”

“Of course. I’ll be in your care.”

“I look forward to learning from you, Master!”

“Mmm hmm. I’ll teach you whatever I know about the basics. What you do with them from there is up to you.”

“I promise I’ll put them to good use! Meeting you has been the best luck I’ve ever had, so I don’t want to waste the opportunity!”

“No need to get too worked up. Let’s just take it nice and slow, okay? Being impatient is never going to end well.”

“Of course! Well, Master, I look forward to seeing you later!”

Celestina waved cheerfully at Zelos, then took her leave.

Huh? What exactly am I meant to do later, anyway? And hang on, forget later—where am I meant to go right now?

And so stood a confused middle-aged man, zoning out and looking absentmindedly at the walls around him.

Zelos was growing increasingly aware of just how much he was out of his element in a place like this.

“I have come to guide you, Sir Zelos. Please, follow me.”

“Huh? U-Uh, thanks for your time.”

The servant that had appeared was an attractive middle-aged butler, who walked away with Zelos in tow. He went left from the entrance hall, climbing a staircase before showing Zelos to the last room on the left. The door opened to reveal a room that—while a little cramped—was more than enough to accommodate a guest.

Best of all, it had a bed. The bedding felt incredibly soft and bouncy, especially

compared to what Zelos had slept on those times outdoors. And what with the lovely view from the window, it was apparent that this was a rather special room.

“This is fantastic. And the scenery outside looks so tranquil. It’s beautiful...”

“Thank you for your kind words. This room is known to offer the finest views of any in our castle. We provide it to only our most esteemed guests.”

“Esteemed? You mean me?”

“Indeed. I am told that you not only solved the young mistress’s problem, but indeed saved the very life of my lord. All considered, it is only natural for us to provide you with this level of hospitality.”

“I’m *already* getting special treatment?! All I did was beat up some bandits...”

Zelos was nothing but grateful for the incredibly warm reception he was receiving.

“What are you saying, sir? In addition to being an extraordinary mage, you have earned the greatest of honors. If anything, letting a man such as yourself go without showing him the utmost hospitality would bring shame to the name of the ducal family.”

“It kind of feels like you’re treating me like I’m more important than I really am...”

“This is but a small token of our gratitude. Far outstripped by what you have done for us.”

All Zelos had really done was drive back some bandits and modify some magic formulas.

He’d never thought that doing something so simple would get him such warm treatment. It was a rather different story, however, from the perspective of the others involved.

To Celestina, Zelos was the man who had helped her to finally use magic after years of feeling powerless, despite her greatest efforts. And to Creston, Zelos had saved not only his own life but also that of his beloved granddaughter, only to follow it all up by solving her biggest problem.

In the span of just a few days, that very granddaughter had managed to level up as well—and the man who had made it all happen had accepted Creston's offer to become the girl's private tutor. He was also a Great Sage, a title reserved only for those who had reached the very pinnacle of magic. To these nobles, then, even the warm treatment they were giving Zelos felt as if it were not enough.

There was a vast gap between each side's values and perspectives.

"Really, though, it seems like this has all been blown up into some big thing. I'm just going to do some tutoring, you know? That's all..."

"You are a truly splendid man. A Great Sage. A man who has fought in battles all over the lands. What we are providing for you here falls far short of everything you are providing to us."

"I'm nothing but an old fool who's spent too long obsessing over his hobbies. Honestly, it feels weird for you to show me so much gratitude."

Here, again, Zelos had a major misunderstanding.

To begin with, deciphering formulas made from magic letters was still seen as uncharted territory. So to not only comprehend those formulas, but then to go on and also optimize them was truly in the realm of impossibility for the mages of this world.

Instead, the mages here focused their research on merely inserting appropriate magic letters into preexisting magic formulas, then checking whether the spells would still activate.

There was no way, then, that this world could overlook a mage such as Zelos, who was capable of not just comprehending the meanings of the magic letters—and strengthening formulas by weaving in the very laws of physics themselves—but even mastering his own original spells. At the same time, however, Zelos had shown a clear unwillingness to get involved in the world of the upper class and its power struggles. So while Creston was doing everything he could to provide the man with hospitality, he was also being careful to avoid going overboard with it.

Zelos, for his part, was oblivious to the old man's intentions. He had no idea

of the vast gap between a noble's and a commoner's definitions of hospitality.

At any rate, while Zelos was ensured the freedom to do as he pleased within the castle, he wasn't familiar enough with the ways of the nobility to realize that. For now, his hands were full merely thinking about his own situation.

"And here is your change of clothes. They are the same clothes worn by us servants, for which I humbly apologize. I beg your understanding."

"Really, it's fine. Thanks for all the kindness."

"It is almost time for dinner. Although, well...it may be advisable to indulge in a bath first."

"There's even a bath here?! Whoa."

"Why, of course. It...does appear that your body has accumulated some dirt, so I would think it best to bathe and clean yourself before the meal."

"You're right. The last time I was able to clean myself was a few days ago, and it was in a river, so I'd love the opportunity to take a proper bath. Would I be able to get in right now?"

"Yes. Just to check—would you already be familiar with the etiquette of bathing in a place such as this?"

"Yeah, I am. Wash myself off before getting into the bath itself, right?"

Heated baths were seen as a luxury reserved mostly for nobles. The norm among the general public was to sweat oneself out in a sauna, then get into a cold-water bath. The fact that Zelos knew the etiquette associated with hot-water bathing indicated to the butler that he must be relatively well-off.

As of that moment, then, the assumption was made that Zelos's upbringing had been affluent enough for him to have used heated baths.

Zelos, however, was once again completely unaware of all these calculations going on in the heads of the people around him. He was just ecstatic at the thought of being able to have a proper bath again.

"Allow me to guide you, then."

The butler guided Zelos toward a room at the far back of the ground floor.

The corridor they took was one used by the lord of the mansion, so the floor was covered with soft carpet. As they walked, Zelos found his attention drawn to the paintings that had been hung up here and there along the walls. And then, eventually, he arrived at the bathroom.

“The bath is in here. Please, take your time to relax and wash away the fatigue of your journey. Here is your towel.”

“Thank you. Ahhhh...a bath really is the best place to kick back and relax. I’m looking forward to taking my first proper one in a while.”

After heading to the changing area with a bounce in his step, Zelos took off his equipment, stored it away in his inventory, and headed into the baths with nothing but a towel.

The baths were decorated with tasteful carvings and a few plants. All of it left Zelos feeling like he’d made his way into an onsen back in Japan.

However, he was not the only one there.

“Ah...”



“Wha—?!”

The naked mage had run into Celestina, just as she was standing to get out of the bath.

The two were silent for a moment—albeit a moment that felt like an eternity. And then...

“E-Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!”

“Wh-Whyyyyyyyyy?!”

The pair’s screams echoed throughout the bathroom.

*

“Dandis? What are you doing here?”

The butler—Dandis—was surprised to hear a woman’s voice calling out to him. He turned to face the voice, and saw Celestina’s personal servant looking at him with a confused expression.

“Me? I just finished escorting our guest to the bathroom. Why do you ask?”

“What?!”

At the woman’s shocked cry, Dandis began to feel a tinge of concern. “Wh-What’s the problem?”

“L-Lady Celestina happens to be using the bath right now...”

“What?! Don’t tell me...”

It was then that the two servants heard a loud outcry coming from the bathroom—a girl’s scream and a middle-aged man’s shout.

The servants stood in stunned silence for a moment.

Their little mistake had created a rather awkward situation.

Even if they were to rush into the bathroom themselves, the two in there were naked. Neither could bring themselves to go in.

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In the aftermath, Dandis and the female servant tried desperately to console

Celestina. The girl was in tears. What was more, they needed to explain the situation to her rather worked-up grandfather...

When Zelos finally sat down for dinner that evening, he was unable to taste a thing.

Chapter 5: The Old Guy Becomes a Private Tutor

Zelos's morning meal was a quiet affair.

Breakfast was to be carried into his room at a set time, and if he were still asleep, he would be forced awake. What was more, the food was lightly seasoned—the kind of thing you'd be hard-pressed to call delicious. Still, it wasn't outright *bad*. Sitting with that plate of bland, unremarkable food, Zelos was in somewhat low spirits, and thinking about his plans for the day only gave him more of a headache.

Yesterday, due to an entirely unexpected turn of events, he'd stumbled in on Celestina naked.

The girl's grandfather had come up to him afterward, a frenzy of emotions and popped veins; it had taken the frantic efforts of both Zelos and Dandis to finally calm him down. And now, Zelos was left with the matter of how to face the poor girl herself.

One way or another, he'd been hired as her private magic tutor, and he was going to have to stay in this old castle for the next two months or so. He found the situation incredibly awkward.

Thinking about it all, he let out another sigh. He'd already lost count of just how many times he'd done so that morning.

"Well, I guess I've gotta just do it. Time to make my way to Celestina's room..." Another sigh.

He was still feeling very reluctant. And having looked through the girl's textbook and other learning materials, he had come to realize that mages in this world had a rather feeble understanding of how magic formulas actually worked. They were clearly lagging behind the playerbase of *Swords & Sorceries*. Even crafters there had been capable of making their own spells; in contrast, it seemed as if this world's magic research was at a standstill.

"How much should I even teach her? At the very least, I know I shouldn't be

teaching her any of the spells I made with my party... Those are all kind of insane. Well, we don't have a sagestone, so creating spells is out of the question—but I guess it'd be fine to at least teach her basic layering."

The custom spells that Zelos used were both powerful and efficient, but their creation came with a number of problems.

In particular, his wide-area annihilation magic was far too powerful for the standards of this world. Countless lives could be lost if it wound up being used for war.

Essentially, a lot of the spells Zelos had made were those that he couldn't trust others to handle properly. If there was one thing he knew for sure, it was that they weren't the kind of things he should be teaching to other people.

If you were trying to create powerful spells with the fifty-six letters that made up regular magic, you typically needed to use large sheets of magic paper. It had been different, however, for Zelos and the rest of the Destroyers. Instead of the magic paper, they had repurposed sagestones, which were the game's ultimate material for creating magic tools.

While he didn't remember exactly what had inspired them, they had used not the fifty-six magic letters but rather the ten magic numbers, creating a new form of magic that relied on machine language.

Rather annoyingly, there was no magic paper large enough to write out the enormous strings of numbers formed by this machine language. But to get around this, the players had used sagestones, which were able to store several magic formulas. The effort to mass-produce these sagestones had seen Zelos and his party engage in countless battles, time and time again, grinding until they almost lost consciousness. Over the course of it all, they'd drawn the attention of many like-minded people, who'd joined their efforts—and finally, over the course of three and a half years, they'd managed to create a number of forbidden spells, including Dark Judgment.

After embedding the spells into the subconscious of each player, the party had reused the sagestones to make items like weapons and secret medicines. So at this point, Zelos was unable to create any more such spells. Creating sagestones required all sorts of ultrarare materials, and he didn't even know

where to start looking for them here. Even if he did, creating those sorts of spells *by himself* would be an even greater undertaking; it promised to be an unimaginable amount of time and work.

At any rate, the process of creating annihilation spells was pure hell. It was a never-ending cycle of writing partial magic formulas out onto magic paper in the form of machine language, embedding those formulas into sagestones, trying to activate them, and revising from there. It had required the players to work simultaneously on both the endless process of programming and the grueling endeavor of debugging the formulas through their screens.

If they'd taken on the challenge of creating these new spells for anything but fun, they would likely have given up before they'd managed to finish.

While the time they'd spent creating spells had had its struggles, it had also been something that they'd all enjoyed—and that was what had made it possible. To try and tackle that alone, however, would be absurd. And even if somebody did manage to achieve it, the sort of powerful spells created by such an approach could only have been used by someone with a very high level.

In other words, these new spells—with only a few exceptions—were so complex that they couldn't be used by anyone under about Level 500. Even if a lower-level caster did manage to use one, a single cast would exhaust their entire mana pool, and the spell probably wouldn't even be all that powerful. So Zelos likely had nothing to worry about on that front.

With the way the laws of nature worked in this world, simply embedding a magic formula into your subconscious wasn't necessarily enough to let you activate the associated spell properly; if you didn't have a thorough understanding, the spell could misfire. A person's overall level played a part in whether they could cast spells or not, as did their levels of particular magic-related skills, with the spells one could cast then being determined by the combined result of those factors.

Only those who properly understood the spells they were trying to use, and had experienced both battles and considerable training, could completely master magic. As long as someone was just at the level of a basic mage like Celestina, it wouldn't much matter if they managed to comprehend advanced

spells—they would still need to raise their level tremendously if they wanted to actually master those spells.

Sooner or later, the people of this world would inevitably learn how to both create new spells and decipher magic formulas—at which point they would be able to make those advanced spells for themselves and use them as they wished. But as long as Zelos didn't teach people the specifics of how to do it, he didn't expect anyone to try and research it themselves for now.

More than anything, it was incredibly time-consuming, bothersome work, and Zelos wasn't particularly interested in going through the process to create those sorts of spells from scratch for a second time.

He didn't want to be reminded of the hellish scenes he'd faced years ago in Japan, when he'd been worked to the bone to meet grueling deadlines in the midst of the global financial crisis.

*

With all those thoughts running through his mind, Zelos walked along the tightly packed cobblestones.

Having never been a teacher before, he was worried about whether he'd even be able to teach Celestina properly.

On top of that, there was yesterday's little incident to consider. He hadn't gotten off to a particularly great start.

It wasn't as if he harbored any ill will toward the girl. How she herself would be feeling about the whole situation, though, was another matter. That was what had Zelos feeling down about the whole thing.

Even if he *were* able to teach her magic, the approach in this world was to use two-dimensional sigils written on magic paper. Considering how little magical knowledge here had advanced, Zelos's magic was on an entirely different level.

In the past, there had been an enormous conflict—and this conflict, which would later come to be known as the Dark God War, had wiped out an advanced magic civilization, leaving barely a trace. That had had a major impact on the world, of course, causing all sorts of documents and literature about magic to be completely lost to history. And as a result, the standards of

civilization had dropped significantly.

Modern-day magic was merely an imitation of that ancient magic. Research into ancient spell scrolls and spell books that had been discovered in old ruins was ongoing, with the researchers trying to use it to recreate the magic from that lost era.

However, it appeared that this research had yet to turn up any significant results. Those looking into it seemed to be having a difficult time trying to revive the lost knowledge from that era. Zelos, for his part, had learned all this by reading a history textbook that he had borrowed from Celestina along with the girl's academy-designated spell book.

Beyond that, he had asked a bespectacled maid to loan him some history books from the castle library, which he then had read to get a rough understanding of the world's history. He had been up late last night, trying his best to gather information on this new world he'd found himself in. After all, he had been thrown into this place with next to no information; the goddesses had carelessly plonked him down into a new world without much thought. You couldn't blame him for trying to glean some more information about the place as soon as he could.

If he was going to live in this world from here on out, information was an absolute must.

"I know firsthand how overpowered the Dark God was. I can see why civilization here was supposedly pushed to the brink of destruction. Still, those damn goddesses... Would it have hurt to at least give me a little customer service after dropping me here?! I just got thrown into a completely new world with no preparation! I wouldn't be surprised to hear that there were some other people reincarnated alongside me who ended up dying before they could even make it to civilization..."

As someone who'd been killed by the Dark God—while at the same time having pulled the trigger himself, in a sense—Zelos was worried about the fates of anyone else in the same boat as him.

For now, however, he had his hands full with just living. He didn't have the time to properly worry about others just yet.

Those thoughts swirling through his mind, Zelos reached Celestina's room. Hesitant though he was, he mustered up his courage and knocked on the door.

*

Having just finished her breakfast, Celestina was sitting in her room. Restless. Anguished.

With last night's incident, Zelos had seen her naked. She was still utterly reeling from the embarrassment.

"It was so different from Grandfather's..."

She specifically avoided saying what she meant by "it." To put it simply, however, the girl could secretly be a bit of a pervert.

Zelos's figure from last night was burned into her mind, and she couldn't get it out.

"Milady, if you do not calm down soon, I worry you might give Sir Zelos an odd impression of yourself."

"But, Miskaaaaa! I'm embarrassed!"

"That may be the case for *you*, but there is no guarantee that Sir Zelos is thinking about it in that way, you know? It would seem that he sees you as just a child, after all."

"I-Is that true?"

Celestina was rather shocked by Miska's words.

She truly was a beautiful girl, but the rumor going around was that Zelos preferred his women somewhat older—and with big breasts, if at all possible. He still couldn't see Celestina as anything but a child.

"Well, it's perfectly acceptable for you to have an interest in gentlemen, Milady. But I would advise you not to see Sir Zelos in that way..."

"Wh-Why? He's an incredibly talented mage, and he can even make his own spells! I don't think you can really find fault with his personality either..."

"From what I hear, however quiet and gentle a man Sir Zelos might be, he can also be incredibly cold-blooded."

“‘Cold-blooded’? He didn’t at all seem that way to me.”

Celestina tilted her head to the side, confused by what Miska was saying.

In Celestina’s eyes, Zelos was an outstanding man—stronger than anyone else, and able to care for others. He seemed, if anything, to be the polar opposite of cold-blooded. But it would appear that Miska saw things differently.

“Please give it a bit more thought. I hear he has spent his life bouncing from one conflict to another, testing out his magic as he goes, correct? That would imply that he cares little for whatever sacrifices or risks he has to accept, as long as he can research his magic and test it out. It would also indicate that he is a rather reckless man himself, the sort who is more than happy to dive headfirst into dangerous places.”

Miska continued to lecture the girl. “To him, I suspect both monsters and soldiers on the battlefield are nothing but convenient research subjects, targets that he’s slaughtered en masse just to try out his magic. If anything, that goes beyond coldhearted—it sounds outright *cruel*. He is most likely a dangerous man. One who can commit atrocities without remorse.”

Miska had a point. Celestina had only perceived how Zelos presented himself outwardly; from a different perspective, he was the sort of man who engaged in insane acts time and time again. But the girl’s eyes were drawn to his brilliance, leaving her unable to see him in any other light. That she was overjoyed with her newfound capabilities as a mage was also a factor. Still, her maid’s words made her realize that there were other ways to look at him.

“He was saying he just wants to lead a quiet life now, though...”

“Well, his age *is* beginning to catch up with him, so he may well have thought that at times. Nobody wants to spend their whole life doing the same things they’ve always done, after all.”

“Miska, it feels like you’re putting a lot of weight behind what you’re saying here...”

“It’s the difference in our life experience, Milady.”

There was a hint of darkness hidden in the maid’s expression.

“You know, I wonder sometimes, Miska—how old are you now? You look exactly the same as you did when I was little, so it’s been on my mind for a while now.”

“It isn’t polite to ask a woman her age, Milady. Even if you are a woman yourself. Do you understand?”

Miska had begun to give off a dangerous aura—enough to let Celestina know that it was a question she shouldn’t have asked.

It appeared that matters of age were taboo to this maid.

Knock, knock.

“Excuse me. It’s Zelos. Is it okay if I come in?”

Speak of the devil—Zelos knocked on the door just as the pair was talking about him. Celestina’s heart was beating like a jackhammer, out of her control. Her mind had already been cast back to the events of last night.

“H-He’s here!!!”

“Milady, I recommend you calm down as best you can. Please try your best to not act suspicious in front of him.”

“I-I’ll t-t-try...”

“You’re already stumbling over your words.”

The emotional girl couldn’t get her mind off her earlier worries.

Worse, the image of Zelos’s naked body was still etched into her brain.

That was how her first day of class began: with worries swirling through the minds of both parties.

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As he entered the room, Zelos took one of the books he’d borrowed and handed it over to Celestina.

It was an old book about magic that had been in the mansion’s library. But despite its age, its explanations of magic formulas and theory were decent, at least compared to the other books he’d seen. And it covered the basics, making it perfect as a textbook.

About thirty percent of the book was little more than meaningless scribbles, far divorced from actual theory. But all Zelos really needed were the pages with the *correct* information, so he decided that he could just ignore the rest and use it as a textbook.

“Well, today’s your first class, so I think we should start with learning the magic letters.”

“The magic letters? I heard they were hieroglyphs that nobody had managed to decipher yet. Have you really managed to do it?”

“They’re actually pretty simple. They can form words and circuits at the same time, and putting them together makes them a convenient tool for interacting with mana. I don’t think it’ll take you long to learn them.”

“I’m aware of that much, but...are they really the sort of thing I’ll be able to learn myself?”

“If you understand what they are, it’s simple. Well, getting to that point can be a bit of a pain, though.”

The magic alphabet included fifty-six letters and ten numerals. Each of the letters had an associated sound, and they could be put together to form words that carried meaning. While these words were read and pronounced differently, they could be deciphered into Japanese, which was a simple task if you understood their meanings. Sometimes, however, the words used would be closer to English, or French, or Spanish, or German, or even Swahili—which could make interpreting them a royal pain.

While many players in *Swords & Sorceries* would come to learn bits and pieces of this magic language as they played the game, it had a lot of difficult words, and Zelos could remember getting really stuck on deciphering some of them.

In this world, however, the situation was different; the mages here knew nothing about any of those languages, leaving them clueless about the meanings of the words. They believed that each individual magic letter carried meaning, and so they had only been looking at those individual letters. The result was that they had been unable to decipher magic formulas.

While they weren’t necessarily wrong in thinking that the letters carried

meaning in one way or another, they were still stumbling over the basics, which stopped them from going any further.

Creating magic formulas simply involved stringing together words that were related to physical phenomena, and those formulas could then be used to make sigils. So if you had a proper understanding of basic physics, creating your own spells was far from a difficult feat.

“I...I didn’t know. I never would’ve thought that they were used to make words...”

“It looks like people here see formulas as being made up of something like numbers or symbols. But they’re actually more like words from ancient times; a single character in and of itself doesn’t really mean anything. Well, even that wrong interpretation was still enough to let them manipulate a little bit of mana, so maybe they assumed they were on the right track.”

“Do you use these letters to make magic, Master?”

“I do, yeah. In my case I use a slightly different method, but the gist of it is that I layer sigils together and optimize them. Oh, and the most powerful spells tend to use the magic numbers, not the letters.”

Zelos had been a programmer back on Earth.

When he created spells, he would typically put the sigils together in a layered structure. In the specific case of annihilation magic, however, things were different. The approach there involved creating magic formulas entirely from ones and zeroes—something that had taken immense amounts of work, and equally complex techniques to calculate all of the numbers involved. Zelos—or Satoshi Osako, as he had been known then—had worked with both his party and some crafters he knew to solve the challenge of embedding magic formulas into sagestones. Essentially, they had chipped away at the creation of these spells through brute force—sheer manpower. Players in *Swords & Sorceries* had a lot of freedom, and those who had gotten bored with regular spell creation formed a team of players with too much time on their hands to take on the challenge of creating spells through this alternative method.

If you took Zelos’s old occupation into account, you could just about say he was cheating. While it wasn’t a challenge he was eager to take on again, each

individual step had ultimately been a trivial task for him.

The odd part was the fact that the game itself had accepted these new spells. While *Swords & Sorceries* might have offered a lot of player freedom, the use of these spells would have required the game to process vast amounts of information, leaving it liable to bugging out if there were any problems.

Huh? Something feels kind of off. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I'm sure there's something wrong with how that all worked...

A hint of unease sent Zelos's mind into overdrive.

Swords & Sorceries had been built using Babel, a computer system that had originally been developed for national defense. Though Babel was incomplete, it still offered vast amounts of processing power. That was why it was able to incorporate these number-based custom magic formulas, which were essentially compressed programs made within the game.

Or at least, that was what the players had thought. But Zelos was just now realizing that that should have been impossible.

It's not right. Swords & Sorceries must've already been a huge, complex network of programs. There's no way it should've been able to accept new spells like that. The spell creation program is one thing, but then there were the effect animations, and all the data that people were adding day after day... There must've been an insane amount of data in there after seven years.

So why didn't it crash? That definitely should've been more data than it could handle. Something's not right. It doesn't make sense...

However much of a supercomputer they'd been using to run the game servers, the fact was that the developers had created a proper world, filled with NPCs that had free choice like real people. Even just processing the thought routines of the AI must have taken an astonishing amount of processing power. So adding vast quantities of additional data on top of that—even if it was compressed—should've been far beyond the game's capabilities to handle.

Zelos had just come to a strongly disconcerting realization about the world he had enjoyed for so long.

“I never would’ve thought you could do something like that with just magic numbers. It’s amazing. Um, Master, are you listening?”

“Huh?! A-Ah, yeah. It does take a lot of time and effort. But still, once you’ve managed to do it, the rest is easy enough.”

“The drawbacks of doing things that way,” he continued, “are that it takes a stupidly long time to make spells, and that you need an absurd amount of manpower, I guess. I wouldn’t recommend trying to copy it. Seriously, it’s hell...”

Having fallen deep down a rabbit hole of thoughts, Zelos had been brought back to his senses in a hurry by Celestina’s question. He had to remember—he was teaching a class at the moment.

Still, his doubts about *Swords & Sorceries* remained nestled somewhere in the back of his mind, leaving him with a lingering sense of unease.

“Is creating spells even something I could do yet? Honestly, I’m not confident I could...”

“Not right now, no. But just keep a level head and take your time to learn the basics correctly. Hmm—let’s start by trying to take apart the Torch spell. There’s nothing quite as important as the basics, after all.”

The most basic of fire spells, Torch was used simply to provide a light source.

By leveraging the caster’s own mana as fuel, the spell could bring in external mana as the medium from which to create a flame. It also included a formula component for regulating that flame with air.

After all, the chemical reaction for fire required both fuel and oxygen, and it wouldn’t be hot unless both of those were present.

It was like how asphalt in urban areas could start to burn if it was overheated for an extended period of time. In that example, heat would be the trigger that started the fire—and the asphalt would be the fuel that sustained it. Obviously, the temperature would continue to rise as the flame spread, so if you wanted to keep it under control, you’d need to splash it with water.

This world’s magic was similar: whatever effect you wanted your spell to

have, it was considered important to always have some kind of control mechanism built into it. These control mechanisms generally didn't cause any kind of change in the world in and of themselves, and they could be reused in other spells. And if you understood how these control mechanisms worked, all that remained was comparing that knowledge to the relevant magic formula components to decipher what things meant.

Today's lesson was opening new doors for Celestina.

And two hours later...

"So, as you can see, making spells requires you to focus on how they function. It's incredibly important to make sure the caster stays safe—for example, there's no point in having an attack spell if you end up hurting yourself with it. What I'm getting at is that anyone who's made spells has only reached that point after a lot of hard work."

"It sounds like even just a spell for making light must have taken a lot of time and effort, then?"

"Yes, exactly. Once you start being able to decipher basic formulas, you'll be able to lean on that to also decipher the nuances of other, more obscure formulas. And if there's still something you can't understand at that point, it might be worth trying out words from another language."

"Like Elvish or Dwarvish? I *do* have some dictionaries for other languages... I see. That sounds interesting."

"If you think of it as something like a word puzzle, then hopefully you can have some fun with it! You might even end up making better progress than you expect."

Celestina had been able to understand how magic formulas worked. Now, however, she was turning her attention to another question.

"But if words can be used to make things happen in the world, then what's the point of turning them into sigils like this? If you're just trying to cause an effect, then wouldn't the magic letters alone be enough?"

"The sigils are there to take in the mana that spells need and use that mana to cause your effect. I guess you could say they're something like eggshells."

“Essentially,” Zelos continued, “the sigil is kind of a container that brings together all the steps of casting a spell and lays them out—so the sigil can take in and store all the mana that’s required, use a magic formula to convert that mana into your desired effect, and then finally activate the spell. You wouldn’t want to gather up all that mana only to have it disperse before you finish casting the spell, after all.”

The creation of efficient spells looked to eliminate even the tiniest wastage of mana. It was essentially an art form.

The more Celestina peered into the machinations of how magic worked—laid out before her by Zelos—the more it all piqued her interest.

“By the way, Master, what do your own magic formulas look like? I’m really interested in seeing them.”

Eventually, however, that inquisitive mind ended up directing itself toward Zelos’s own magic.

And that would mean coming face-to-face with fear.

Zelos hesitated for a moment before speaking. “My magic? Well, let’s see... It might be good to let you know how dangerous magic can be, I suppose. I certainly wouldn’t want you using the fifty-six letters to accidentally make a spell with some kind of dangerous effect...”

“‘How dangerous magic can be’? What do you mean?”

“Properly thought-out spells can be considered an art form. But, you see, there are also some truly horrific spells out there, ones that can take a whole lot of lives. And my spells are state-of-the-art. What I’m saying is, they fall into that latter camp. The dangerous one.”

As he spoke, Zelos gathered mana in the palm of his hand and manifested a magic formula.

It was one that contained an immense amount of mana, and it looked like almost a cube. Within it were both extremes of magic—the highest highs and the lowest lows. Incredibly detailed magic letters were packed densely inside, and they were constantly rotating around at high speed; it all made for a formula so dense as to be on a completely different plane of existence than

beginner magic. The formula could be activated to send out jet-black orbs, and it escalated from there.

While beautiful in a way, the rotation involved in this densely packed magic formula also concealed a bone-chilling level of firepower. Even just the mana emanating out of it was enough to make you realize as much, whether you wanted to or not.

Celestina was shocked. “Wh-What *is* this?”

“It’s the magic formula for my ultimate spell: Dark Judgment. If I were to activate this now, the whole area around us would be obliterated immediately. Without a trace. *This* is why magic can be dangerous. Even just *having* this much power makes it enough of a threat—but on top of that, this is the kind of thing that some country or another would see as the greatest of treasures, I’m sure. People out there would stop at nothing to get their hands on it. Despite the fact that activating it would cause countless deaths...”

“What kind of magic even is this?! When you say that our surroundings would be ‘obliterated,’ what exactly do you mean...?”

“It’s wide-area annihilation magic, one of a number of top-level destruction spells we made. We’d looked into old books about powers the Dark God was said to have had, and we were trying to investigate how those powers worked so that we could recreate them. We made them half for fun, just to see whether we could...but the end result was *this*. So please, I want you to remember: curiosity can lead people to create some incredibly dangerous things.”

Upon hearing the words “destruction magic,” Celestina looked as though she had seen something terrifying.

Zelos’s talk of investigating the Dark God’s power through “old books” had been a lie, but what he was saying was true on the whole.

“Wh-Why would you make such a powerful spell?”

“Because it looked like an interesting challenge, of course. Do you get what I’m saying? Creating spells is fun, sure. But if you take your curiosity too far, you can end up making something incredibly dangerous by accident. And the worst

part is, there are influential people out there who would do absolutely anything to get their hands on this sort of magic. Without caring about the sort of harm it might cause.”

In this world, where all sorts of different countries were packed closely together, destruction magic was a research priority for many nations.

If you had powerful magic, other countries wouldn't try to attack you—and at the same time, you'd have a much easier time of being the aggressor yourself. That could lead to countless innocent lives being lost, and the land itself being reduced to a barren wasteland.

“It's fine to try and make spells out of curiosity. In fact, that can be a great motivator for getting better. I won't tell you not to do it. I just really think you should stay well away from destruction magic. It can only lead to tragedy—and burning hatred from the relatives of anyone killed by it.”

“Not to mention,” Zelos continued, “that hatred could drive more people to make destruction magic themselves—it'd be an endless cycle of conflict. It's almost a cursed chain of events. But I'm sure there'd be some ambitious, powerful people out there who wouldn't hesitate to use it. I want you to understand that that's the danger of magic—and also the reason it's taboo to pass your magic on to other people.”

When he'd looked into the matter, Zelos had found that the various factions of mages had been created as a safety measure to curb the use of destruction magic.

However, it had only been a matter of time before these factions had ended up fighting among each other, each seeing the others as enemies and jostling for power over them. And at the same time, each had begun clamoring for war as an opportunity to stake out achievements to their name. Some had even ended up trying to pull strings behind the scenes in other countries to make that happen. Zelos's opinion on it all was that if the country's system had fallen so far from its original ideals, it would be better off not having that system at all.

“Mages shouldn't have political power; they should always try to be neutral. At least, that's what I think. There are plenty of ways to use magic apart from

destruction magic, after all—the battlefield isn't the only place where magic has a use. There are so many other things you can do with it, and I feel like working toward those could open up a whole lot of new opportunities.”

“Things other than destruction magic? Do you mean the likes of magic tools or potions?”

“Things along those lines, yeah. Magic that's designed to make people happy. Magic that gives people easier, better lives. *That's* what I think the world needs. If nothing else, you should give up on trying to be like *me*.”

But to Celestina, who had been born into a ducal family, magic was nothing but a tool for protecting one's country in battle.

She had, after all, been treated coldly precisely because her lack of power meant that she would be unable to protect the people—and now that she had finally obtained that power, the girl felt a strong sense of obligation weighing on her shoulders. But here was Zelos, suggesting that she should look for a path other than that of battle, and telling her not to follow the same path he had.

It all left the girl feeling rather lost.

“Celestina. What kind of mage do *you* want to be? Is there any kind of goal you're aiming for?”

“What? A-Aiming for, you ask?”

“When a mage goes into battle, people are going to die. It's a foregone conclusion. But there's more to being a mage than just fighting. I want you to give it some good thought—about what kind of mage you want to be, and about how much hard work you can put into making that a reality.”

“I...I don't want to be a mage who just fights people. But...”

“If you don't have any particular goal in mind, then maybe start by taking a close look at the people around you. At the same time, look at yourself; always be thinking about who you are and who you want to become. That's the only way you'll reach an answer.” Zelos wore an earnest expression. “I can teach you magic, but I can't show you the exact path to follow. I mean, I know I'm not in the kind of position to be sounding all high and mighty like this. I'm the man responsible for unleashing some truly terrifying spells onto the world, after

all...”

Even if it *had* all been done as part of a game—and even if the power he had now was nothing but a gift that had been forced onto him by the gods.

Zelos wasn’t the kind of prideful man who would get drunk on his own power. After all, he saw it as far too dangerous, too much to handle. He knew it wasn’t the kind of power he should just wield on a whim as he wished. Though that was something he tended to forget from time to time...

Still, from Celestina’s perspective, Zelos looked to be the ideal mage.

The way he didn’t get drunk on his own power—and didn’t share it with others—embodied true neutrality, while his resolve to teach others about magic but not about the fruits of his particular research embodied his virtue. Further, he was open and honest about the ramifications of his own power, and seemed to constantly impose a strict sense of responsibility on himself when it came to that dangerous power.

Having seen all of this through the lens of Zelos’s somewhat constructed backstory had given Celestina misunderstandings—and those misunderstandings had already made her start to idolize the man.

All Zelos had wanted, meanwhile, was to warn the girl away from getting involved with destruction magic...

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“All right. That should just about do it for today’s lecture.”

“That sounds good. I have other lessons after this, so I’ll need some time to prepare for those anyway.”

“Let’s do some practical training tomorrow to use up your mana. I’ll create some basic golems, so you can use them as targets to level up.”

“G-Golems?”

“Yeah. Even golems created by a mage will still give experience if you beat them, so I guess you could classify them as kind of man-made monsters? Either way, though, they’re fairly weak, so feel free to use some flashy magic and blow them to pieces.”

“I’ll do my best, Master!”

Celestina had begun to walk the path of a mage.

It wasn’t yet clear just where that path would take her. But she had an ideal mage in her sights now, and she’d work hard to try and become that kind of ultimate mage herself—whatever form that would take. All as she chased after the back of the Great Sage, Zelos...

That Great Sage himself, meanwhile, was now filled with reservations about the game known as *Swords & Sorceries*—reservations that had never occurred to him before. But he would need to wait a while before he could shine a proper spotlight on them and try to discover the truth.

The day’s class had opened up all sorts of new doors for Celestina.

Not only had Zelos taught her how to decipher your typical magic formulas, but he’d also shown her a special, incredibly dense type of magic formula that outstripped them. And then there was the question of who she herself wanted to be as a mage.

Having never even been able to use magic until now, that wasn’t something Celestina had thought about before. Her only goal had been learning to use it in the first place.

Her previous efforts toward that end had not been in vain; she’d earned herself the top grade in the Istol Academy of Magic’s theory classes. Yet at the same time, her inability to use magic had seen her labeled a failure at that same academy, and she’d been bombarded by scorn and ridicule by those around her.

In spite of that, she’d refused to give up—and just as she had begun to think about looking into the magic formulas themselves, she had met Zelos.

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Zelos had resolved Celestina’s problem in a flash. He had also shown her a whole new world—and highlighted the dangers that lay within it.

All this was far removed from the sort of thing she was taught at the

academy. The only focus there was power, and none of the teachers would engage with the students on broader concepts like how they should treat magic in the first place. There was also, of course, no time for considering what sort of mages the students should actually be aiming to become. No—the entire curriculum revolved around firing off magic and measuring its power.

The students weren't encouraged to spend any time thinking about their futures. Any time not spent in practical training was taken up by lecture after lecture, the teachers droning on and on in monotone voices; trying to help the students grow as *people* didn't even cross their minds, let alone make its way into the classroom. If you met the right conditions, you'd be able to activate even a subpar magic formula; if you didn't, you'd be branded a failure and left behind. That was all there was to it. While it was true that using magic every day would increase the size of one's mana reserves, that was the system's one and only benefit. The students were practically left to their own devices.

As educators, then, the teachers were completely useless. And the academy's management was only made worse by all the factional infighting that went on inside its walls: teachers would give the cold shoulder to any students not from their faction, while those who *were* from the same faction as them would be given special treatment.

Those who'd come from influential families tended to get even more in the way of favoritism. In fact, that was the only reason that Celestina hadn't been kicked out by now—each faction wanted to curry the favor of the Solistia ducal family.

Each of Celestina's two brothers were already associated with a faction—to be more precise, it was said that each had become a symbol of sorts among the top brass of one of the two major factions. Any slipup could lead to a battle over succession, and potentially even civil war within the duchy.

It would be one thing if that were all—but the two had royal blood, albeit from a branch family. That placed them in the line of succession for the throne as well. Of course, all sorts of people were trying anything they could think of to get the boys on their side, and by this point, the situation was one wrong step from plunging not only the duchy but also the entire country into a civil war over who should take the throne.

To top it all off, there was no way that any hostile nation would miss that kind of opportunity. And with all those threats looming on the horizon, the academy—filled to the brim with egotistical sorts interested in nothing but flaunting their power and authority—seemed to Celestina a miserable, incredibly narrow-minded place.

“I wish the teachers at the academy were like Master...”

Having been exposed to the cruelty of society right from her earliest memories, Celestina didn’t see the academy in a particularly good light. If anything, *they* were the ones who had endorsed the flawed magic formulas, given the long list of teachers who worked there had failed to even notice those flaws.

It was clear that they were far outclassed by Zelos—and above all, they had been unable to help Celestina use magic. The girl couldn’t muster up any respect for them. And she similarly struggled to see any appeal in the factions that those people seemed so intent on fighting for.

The thought that she’d have to go back there in two months was making her mood take a turn for the worse.

“Oh, Tina! Did you just finish your lesson?”

“Grandfather! Yes, it was a lot of fun. Easy to understand too!”

“Music to my ears! May I ask what sort of things you were taught?”

“Of course. I still have some time before my dance lesson, so I can spare a few moments.”

“Lovely. After all, this is just about all a retired old man like me has to look forward to.”

Chatting with his granddaughter was Creston’s favorite pastime—even if he *did* tend to dote on her too much every now and again.

As Celestina began to explain what she had learned, the old man’s face was gleaming with delight at the opportunity to talk with his granddaughter. Yet as the conversation continued, his expression started to sour. The trigger had been the mention of Dark Judgment—Zelos’s wide-area annihilation spell.

Celestina, however, failed to notice that change in her grandfather's expression, caught up as she was in her excitement to tell him about what she had learned.

"Hmm... A way to decipher magic formulas, you say? Oh, Tina... You must never speak of that to anybody else. *Especially* to anybody from one of the factions."

"I know. They'd only use it to get up to no good, I'm sure."

"I'm glad you understand. Still, though...wide-area annihilation spells? And you say they were made to imitate the power of the Dark God? Good grief..."

"Yes. Honestly, it kind of scared me. I didn't know Master was shouldering such a dangerous burden."

"I expect he is fully aware of just how dangerous he is. Which would likely explain his wish to avoid the spotlight, at least to some extent."

Creston was weighing the pros and cons of having Zelos around. On one hand, there was the dreadful power his insane research had brought into the world, and on the other, his performance as a teacher.

As one of the country's authority figures, Creston could hardly leave such a dangerous man to his own devices; there was an imperative of sorts to keep him tied down in one way or another. But at the same time, he didn't want to make an enemy of the man.

Zelos was also an excellent tutor—and he was already going above and beyond to help her. He'd emphasized the dangers of magic to the girl, but he'd also encouraged her to start thinking about what sort of mage she should aim to become.

While each faction had its own focus, the large majority assumed that mages would focus on fighting, as a matter of course. Therefore, most were so warlike that they'd kick out any members who tried to follow a different path.

Zelos, however, had asserted to Creston's granddaughter the importance of magic created to make people happy—of finding spells that would aid the people in their day-to-day lives.

Taking all of this into account, Creston expected that trying to force Zelos into military service would only make an enemy out of him. And if Creston forced the matter, he suspected, the man would simply disappear into the night. Dropping that particular issue would of course mean missing out on the opportunity to have an excellent mage on the battlefield, but it would also mean—or so Creston assumed—that Zelos would be fairly willing to cooperate on any matters *not* related to war.

Despite what its name might have implied, the Magic Kingdom of Solistia was quite militaristic; making any stupid moves could lead to life-or-death issues. It would be imperative, then, to have a talented mage as a successor.

What was more, Creston had never even considered the notion of a mage who worked to help the people directly. It was as if he had finally seen the light of a new possibility.

“Mages who work for the people, who have no need for political power. In and of itself, I find it entirely too vague a concept...”

“Still,” Celestina said, “I think having mages like that would improve the people’s opinion of mages as a whole. It kind of feels like mages are the same as magic tools; it all comes down to how you use their magic.”

Creston saw merit in his granddaughter’s words. “I suppose there *are* a lot of mages out there drumming up resentment with their arrogance toward the people.”

The common people hated mages about as much as they hated arrogant nobles. Mages like that would sometimes receive stern warnings from the king, of course—but typically, any criticism that came their way would be smothered by nobles with whom they were in good standing. You could’ve made a good argument for calling them all traitors, but at the end of the day, it was the nobles and their bureaucrats who kept the country running, not the king. Ultimately, a simple bribe was enough to make even serious injustices vanish without a trace.

“I swear...this all makes my head hurt.”

“Honestly, I think it’d be best if Master could just become the leader of the mages and crack down on them...”

“I very much doubt Zelos would be willing to do that sort of thing. And I know not what could happen if we were to make an enemy of him.”

It would’ve been rather rude to push that sort of responsibility onto the man who’d saved their lives—especially since he’d said that he hoped to live a secluded life on a quiet plot of land. No, they couldn’t force him to do it, even if they’d wanted to. But Zelos’s stock was rising in their minds.

The former duke was dedicated to the future of the country, and it gave him nothing but worries. His mind was now filled with the difficult matter of how, exactly, to bridge the factional divides between the mages.

Creston’s chat with his granddaughter was supposed to have been an enjoyable one, and yet it had ended up winding its way around to political concerns.

It was almost an occupational disease—and it seemed the old man would have no respite from it, even in his retirement.

Zelos, meanwhile, was putting everything he had into working a field in the castle’s courtyard. He spent the rest of the day there, whiling away his time.

Once a hobby farmer, always a hobby farmer.

Chapter 6: The Old Guy Holds Combat Training

Dawn was breaking on Zelos's second day of class as Celestina's private tutor. The plan for today: having the girl fight golems in the courtyard.

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Zelos had summoned mud golems—creatures that were, as the name would suggest, made from mud. Each of them was about Level 3. His reason for planning out this combat training went something like this:

Being able to fight in close quarters can mean the difference between life and death for a mage, you know? A lot of mages who run out of mana in the middle of a fight end up just running away with some monster chasing after them. I'm not saying you need to be as strong in close quarters as a swordsman, but ideally you should be able to beat some weak monsters without any fuss.

Zelos was largely correct; just like in any video game, the norm here was that any mage who ran out of mana was nothing but a burden. That was a common belief in this world, and so it was rare for mages—who were, at the core of things, researchers—to fight at the front lines of a battle.

Instead, a mage's role on the battlefield was to serve as long-distance artillery, throwing out one attack after another from afar until they ran out of mana. This was in part a vestige of an older time, when mages had been *properly* focused on research; but that discrepancy—paired with societal changes that had seen mages gain the right to command armies on the battlefield—had brought about a growing sense of conflict between the mages and the knights.

The knights wanted the mages to support them from behind, providing cover fire and disturbing the enemy forces. But the mages often refused to do so, preferring to focus purely on attacking. Another option would've been for the mages to play an important role on the front lines themselves, which would've been entirely possible if they'd made proper use of support spells and magic

tools—but that, too, was something they refused to do.

The mages' stubbornness and arrogance had created only more discord between themselves and the knights. In consequence, the relationship between the mages and the knights was rather tense—and it was now causing real problems for the Magic Kingdom of Solistia.

It was common enough for the heads of the Order of Knights and the Order of Mages to run into each other in castle hallways in the royal capital, and interactions between them tended to escalate into huge arguments. Widespread rumors among the commoners talked of a civil war between the two sides being likely in the near future.

The royals, for their part, avoided backing either side, and the Duke of Solistia was similarly unable to thoughtlessly intervene; all they were doing for now was sitting back and keeping a close eye on it all. Then there was the nobility, who were split into two factions on the matter—each of which was constantly quarreling with each other. And on top of it all were the internal factions within the Order of Mages, serving only to complicate matters further.

Fearful of pouring oil on the fire, the royals would surely continue to stay out of the matter, making sure not to back either side. That being the case, all eyes were on the line of succession for the currently neutral duke. Both the knights and the mages were eager to add the family to their camp—an eagerness that had seen both sides start pulling all sorts of strings behind the scenes.

Exacerbating the problem were the various smaller factions of mages, each of which was trying to manipulate things in their own direction. Long story short, the situation was only getting worse.

All this exposition was enough to dumbfound a certain freeloading middle-aged mage.

“Even mages should be able to fight in close quarters. Large-scale battles are pretty much a living organism; you can never know how they’re going to develop. It’d be incredibly naive to just assume that you’ll always be able to sit back at a safe distance and fire off spells.”

“Does that mean that even retreating from the back lines could be difficult in certain battles?”

“Yeah. Mages are usually meant to work together with shield bearers or swordsmen, who serve as a wall at the vanguard. Their main job is to help turn the tide in that vanguard’s favor by using big spells to disrupt the enemy formation. I think mages were always meant to be unsung heroes in battle—kind of a supporting, nurturing role.”

Mages would typically have fewer defensive capabilities than swordsmen, and fewer offensive capabilities than either heavily armored shield bearers or warriors who excelled at inflicting powerful blows. Depending on how they had been trained, however, they could muster up a reasonable defense. And on top of that, they could take up swordsmanship themselves; they weren’t limited to magic. Mages with such a skill set could potentially open the battlefield right up and, in the right situation, join a raid on the enemy forces themselves. In short, they could become all-purpose hybrid fighters.

Less charitably, you could say that this made mages the jack-of-all-trades, master of none. But utilizing each of those trades in the right way could allow a mage to shine in all sorts of situations.

Regardless, it was essential for mages to have ways to defend themselves. And the more ways they had, the better their odds would be of surviving on the battlefield. This training, then, was meant to teach Celestina not only how to fight but also how to improve her chances of staying alive.

“If anything, mages should be grateful for the people fighting at the vanguard. Mages prefer to stay at the back; their job is to support their allies at the vanguard, and improve the situation for them as much as they can. So having those two sides caught up in bickering with each other just seems pointless. Of course, I’m not saying that mages should *only* focus on supporting the knights—they’ll obviously be firing off some attacks as well—but the only reason they even get time to finish their incantations is because the vanguard *buys* them that time. Plus, depending on the tide of battle, a mage might have to come to the front line themselves and do their supporting and attacking from there, so I’m not sure it’s a great idea for the two sides to see each other as enemies. I mean, they’re fighting alongside each other to protect the same country...”

“You’re completely right, Master. And it’s even more persuasive when it’s coming from someone who’s got as much combat experience as you.”

Creston weighed in as well. “Indeed. It would be splendid if the Order of Knights and the Order of Mages could adopt this mindset themselves... For now, however, I suspect it will be impossible. They are all rather obstinate, after all.”

Seeing as today’s training was to involve real combat, Creston had come along himself to keep a watchful eye on his granddaughter. Or at least, that was the pretense; he was mostly just there to kill some spare time. But the old man did love his granddaughter, and he did simply wish to be there in person to see her grow and mature.

Zelos was gradually coming to understand that the man was a little eccentric.

“A lot of people say that ‘a mage without mana is just a regular person.’ This training is meant to help you make up for that—to let you do something even when you’ve run out of mana. The enemies I’ve got here for you are weak, but they’re still golems, so feel free to attack them as hard as you want. And hey, you might even be able to learn some close-quarters fighting skills as a bit of a bonus. Still, though they’re weak, there are going to be a *lot* of these guys, so make sure to keep distance in mind. Move around, fire off a bit of magic every now and then, and generally just test out everything you can think of. Oh, and you might want to think of attack spells as your trump card.”

“This is my first time seeing such an amazing training setup. I never would’ve thought of using golems...”

“Mud golems are great for this. Their attacks are weak, but they’ll keep regenerating over and over, so they can be a bit of a pain! They’re about the best opponent you could ask for if you want to get some real combat experience without having to worry about dying.”

“A wise idea, yes. They may be a nuisance in large groups, but if you can make your way through them, I daresay it is a given that you will improve at fighting. And even if they *are* man-made, golems are seen as monsters. Why, they sound like the *perfect* foe for experiencing combat.”

The experience that people in this world earned upon defeating monsters came from taking the natural mana that had made up the monster’s spirit and absorbing it into their own spirit, allowing them to improve their abilities. That

process was known as “leveling up,” and defeating monsters would allow you to significantly increase both your skill levels and your overall level. Plus, if you went about that by casting spells and using up your mana, you could expect your total mana pool to grow slightly as a bit of a bonus.

Achieving that in a controlled environment required the aid of a mage with a much higher level; you needed an incredible amount of mana to summon golems en masse. Zelos’s mana pool and level were both extraordinary—if all you needed were weak golems like these, he could create as many as he liked.

Since today’s lesson was to involve combat, Celestina was wearing not only her academy-designated robe but also, of course, her designated armor over top. She also wielded a single-handed mace, appropriate for a mage.

“Okay, then—let’s start the training. Remember, they might be weak, but you could still get hurt if you let your guard down, so please make sure you pay attention. Oh, and long battles can get pretty tough, so try your best to pace yourself with your mana. I’ll stop things if I think they’re getting too dangerous, mind you.”

The point of having Celestina regulate her mana in this training was, of course, to help her develop an intuitive knack for how much mana she had left at any given point. If she were to neglect that matter and just use up all her mana without thinking, she’d be sure to lose.

While today was only training, knowing how much mana you had in a real battle could be the difference between life and death. It was going to be a harsh training session—one intended to help the student get a feel for their mana and figure out their limits.

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Celestina was brimming with motivation.

Since she’d never been able to use magic before, she’d always had to sit and watch combat training from the sidelines. The fact that she could actually take part in this sort of training now was proof, then, that she had truly become a mage. And given just how long she had been dreaming about this day, it was no surprise that she was eager. But the mud golems didn’t care one way or another for her thoughts—and in they came, rushing forward all at once.

Golems themselves were inorganic beings, so you could defeat them with ease by destroying their cores. But as soon as the number of golems dropped, Zelos would immediately replace any that had fallen, making for a battle without end. The purpose of this training was for Celestina to learn how to use a weapon, while also considerably leveling up her magical attribute skills and her fighting skills at the same time—and to achieve that, it was designed to be a fairly demanding routine.

“Hiyah!”

Celestina was making valiant strikes against the golems with her mace, smashing them apart without hesitation.

While her shouts of exertion sounded cute, her weapon was anything but as she swung it around, reducing each golem to nothing but a spray of mud whenever she landed a blow. None of the golems that approached her lasted long before ending up as an inanimate pile of mud.

She was cleanly cutting down the golems as they came from her left. Occasionally, she would make a daring move herself, pushing her way into the melee.

“It kind of looks like she’s used to this sort of hand-to-hand fighting. Has she been learning hand-to-hand combat for self-protection or anything?”

“No, I haven’t taught her anything of the sort! But I suspect that, whenever she was watching her classmates train in their own mock battles, she was thinking about how *she* would move in those situations. She seems a tad unsteady on her feet. Uncertain of herself, at times. See?”

“So she learned all this just from watching other people? She might actually be pretty talented. Maybe she could even go all out and try to become a spellsword?”

“Hmm. ’Twould not be a problem if she did, but the girl has her heart set on becoming a mage. I don’t see all that much point in forcing swordsmanship onto her.”

“I’m a mage myself, but I’m not too bad with my fists either, you know? I’d lose to a swordsman of the same level, though.”

“I feel like you might not be the best yardstick. The girl needs only be normal, I tell you, normal...”

At first, Celestina had been mowing down the golems with ease—but that didn’t last for long. About ten minutes into the training, her movements began to grow sloppier, and she was gradually driven into a corner. Having never been trained as a swordsman or anything of the like before, she probably hadn’t been thinking about pacing herself. Her movements slowed due to fatigue, and some of the golems began to land stray hits on her.

“*This* is the important part. How does she get out of this sort of situation? That’s what really matters on the battlefield. Using magic to break her way out is definitely an option... Either way, a mage’s true worth lies in their ability to understand the situation around them and choose the best option.”

“Indeed. That’s the sort of thing you can only learn in real combat, after all. I suspect it will be a difficult moment for her.”

“Yeah. The more she keeps it up, though, the more she’ll get the hang of it, and the more her abilities will grow. She’ll get better at fighting as she goes.”

“What if muscle pain renders her unable to move before then?”

Muscle pain was a hurdle you had to overcome if you wanted to get stronger. Both swift movements and the ability to assess one’s situation were essential skills for a mage—and tough times like this were the perfect opportunity to learn those skills.

There was no end to the list of strong people who’d been overwhelmed by enemy numbers and lost as a result. Many fighters got big-headed about their own abilities, began to take life-or-death battles too lightly, and ended up paying with their lives.

It was similar for monsters themselves; even strong ones could sometimes end up being taken down by sheer force of numbers. People and monsters alike, then, needed good judgment to find their way out of those sorts of predicaments—and to retreat from them, if necessary. That was exactly what this training was meant to teach.

“This is...” Celestina was panting. “This is pretty hard...”

She was coming to realize how naive her assumptions had been.

Since the golems would continue to pop back up no matter how many she defeated, she'd have no card to play if she got surrounded. Maybe she'd be able to use her magic and forge herself a narrow path through which to escape—but the golems wouldn't let up on their assault.

Her mistake was that she'd initially seen them as weak, and she'd responded by going on the offensive herself. She would've been better off if she'd just focused on dealing with the golems that were coming toward her.

What was more, golems were able to get right back up if you didn't destroy their core. So any golems with cores that Celestina hadn't properly destroyed would regenerate themselves and keep coming, putting her at a further disadvantage.

That was the nasty part of this training; you had no choice but to keep up endless attacks on all of these weak enemies.

Honestly, it was the kind of training that left you feeling frustrated and depressed.

"They're going to overwhelm me at this rate. I need to find some way to retreat..."

Celestina was evading the golems' attacks—and occasionally swinging her mace in retaliation—as she looked for the best spot to break through and escape from the ring of golems that had surrounded her. Growing increasingly impatient, she added magic into the mix, continuing to pry for an opening.

Since Zelos had told her in advance about the goal of this training, she had been prepared for it to some extent. Actually *experiencing* it, however, had proved a more troublesome task than she had initially expected.

The golems themselves moved slowly, providing ample opportunity to use magic. But if she were to fire off spells without thinking, her mana would run dry in a flash, leaving her collapsed on the ground. Her only real hope was her mace—but since she had gone all out with that at the start of the fight, her arm had grown tired and heavy, leaving her unable to strike down the mud golems like she wanted.

While she still had a buckler in her other hand, it was a light shield, only meant to block fatal blows. It was easy to maneuver, but not particularly reliable. What you needed when you were surrounded like this was the full armor of a knight.

While Celestina was lost in thought, a golem sent a strong blow flying toward her arm.

“Agh!”

She somehow managed to block it with the buckler—but if this had been a stone golem, she probably would’ve been dead. She felt a wave of frustration wash over her whole body.

Trying to reduce the golems’ fighting power in any way she possibly could, Celestina forced herself to strike down one after another with her mace. And with each one she defeated, she opened up a clearer escape route. Zelos, however, continued to create more golems to replace those that fell.

As Celestina’s mace—which she was now swinging only out of frustration—crushed another golem into pieces, mud splattered over her, dirtying her clothes. Mud golems were made of mud, after all; even if you took a direct hit from one, you wouldn’t really take much damage. Their ability to regenerate was impressive, though, and if you let your posture drop and left an opening, you’d be encircled by golems by the time you were able to get back up.

Flailing about from side to side, Celestina’s mace struck down another two golems.

“Okay,” she told herself. “Be calm. Don’t leave myself open. Be careful with my magic...”

Celestina had decided that her best bet would be to capitalize on the mud golems’ lack of speed. With a cry, she charged the throng of golems to her right. The golems themselves were fragile, and if you managed to hit their core accurately and shatter it, they’d crumble back into mud. That, she figured, was the surest route to making it through this trial.

This was a strategy she’d thought up back when she’d spectated the mock battles at the academy. Watching the others had led her to consider what she’d

do if she were surrounded like that; in fact, she'd run simulations of those scenarios in her head over and over again.

The girl had hated simply having to sit on the sidelines and watch—so it was ironic, then, that that very experience was helping her now to move better than an amateur. You could never really know what sorts of experiences would end up helping you out in the long run.

“Mana, swirl about and empower me. Power Boost!”

Celestina cast a spell to boost her physical strength, temporarily increasing her combat prowess.

Relying then on sheer power, she mowed down more mud golems with her mace, creating herself a buffer zone. All that was left now was to target the weakest point in the ring of golems around her and force her way through it.

Looking to buy herself time for another incantation, Celestina crushed some nearby golems, then gathered up mana and prepared herself to activate a magic formula.

“Flowing water, pierce my foes. Cleanse the stain before me, O liquid serpent. Aqua Jet!”

While it wasn't a particularly powerful spell, the force of the water was more than enough to defeat the weak golems. And cast from close range, it was able to pierce right through them, allowing her even to bring down some of the golems in the back. She set off running.

Aqua Jet was made to pierce through a single enemy. If you were skilled enough, however, you could make it powerful enough to pierce right through multiple foes.

The mud golems' constitution made them relatively weak against spells that used mass or heat, and it was easy to break them into pieces with a single hit.

That was true even if they managed to surround you—they still had little in the way of defenses, so any magic that pierced through enemies would allow you to defeat them with ease.

Having managed to form a narrow gap in the ring of golems, Celestina rushed

toward it as fast as she could.

“I did it! I made it out!”

“Sure you’re not celebrating a bit early? Letting your guard down can be deadly, you know!”

“Wha—?!”

As Zelos was speaking, something grabbed onto Celestina’s leg.

She was stopped in her path, and came tumbling down, carried by her forward momentum.

“Aaaaaaahhhhhh!”

SPLOOSH!

Celestina plunged right into a puddle she’d created with her own spell.

“Ugh. What’s—”

As she turned her head to look, she saw that the arm of a mud golem had wrapped itself around her leg.

It was an abnormally long arm.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Oh, I *will* tell you. One of the golems you thought you’d defeated with your Aqua Jet managed to survive. Don’t lose focus until you’re absolutely sure you’re safe!”

“Aww! I was almost out...”

“Don’t feel too down about it. I think you’ve done pretty well for your first training session. And it looks like your level’s gone up as well, so I’d honestly call this a pretty good success.”

“Mmm.” She groaned. “I’m still frustrated.”

She was seriously down in the dumps now.

“I think your main mistake was that you went too hard right at the start. If you’d fought more carefully while keeping an eye on their movements, I’m pretty sure you would’ve managed to last longer.”

“I realized that after a while, but it was too late by then. I think I got a bit carried away.”

“Oh? What, were you *that* happy to be taking part in a mock battle?”

“Yes. I’ve always had to just watch before. And then my classmates would all make fun of me afterward...”

“That being the case, you managed to move pretty well. I’d say you get a passing mark. Just.”

“Only just, huh? I guess I’ve still got a long way to go.”

Celestina was still struggling to accept the outcome, it seemed. She was filled with regret.

The girl was being harsh on herself, but Zelos didn’t see it that way. Just from watching others fight, she’d learned to anticipate the moves of her enemies, and she’d honed her judgment enough to figure out a way out of the ring of mud golems. All in all, he thought a single month would be plenty for her to become fairly powerful. And once she got to that point, he felt she’d even be ready for training in real combat.

“I guess we’ll leave it here for today—but should we do some more combat training tomorrow? Then we can follow it up with another lecture on magic formulas in the afternoon.”

“Really?! Yes! Please! I’d love to!”

“All right, then. In that case, please reflect some more on what you could’ve done better today, and be ready to put those ideas into practice tomorrow. I don’t have anything else to add from my end. After all, when you’re fighting for real, there’s no one there to teach you; your only option is to have a good think about your own fighting style. Losing is just another kind of lesson.”

“I’m still frustrated, Master. So this is how real battles feel...”

“Oh? I think you’re actually pretty lucky, being able to practice fighting like this without needing to worry about dying. You even get to prepare before you start—unlike in war, you don’t need to panic and suddenly get ready for an unexpected fight.”

The Istol Academy of Magic had a set fighting style; in other words, all students learned to fight in the same way.

Training like that, however, inevitably revealed differences between the students. It wasn't as if every last one was a good fit for that one fighting style, after all.

There were likely some who would've preferred to fight with swords, or axes, or spears—and yet the academy forced the same one style onto all of them. It seemed like a rather hasty decision to Zelos.

“Finding your own fighting style is another point of training. Try out all sorts of things, and feel free to fail. You'll learn plenty of lessons from those failures. If all you're doing in training is following what other people tell you, you won't be able to apply any skills you learn to new situations. Just repeating the same motions again and again will leave you kind of half-baked as a fighter; you've got to specifically put in the effort and think about how *you* want to fight.”

“It's okay to fail? I wasn't expecting that. It's nice to hear, though.”

“Mmm hmm. I've failed at all sorts of things myself. But as long as you treat those failures as lessons and make sure to learn from them, they're nothing to be embarrassed by. Fail as many times as you need to; it's all experience.”

Zelos had failed at life, in a sense. Well, that had been back in his old world...but the words still carried extra meaning for him.

“By the way, what exactly does the combat training look like at that academy of yours? I've never really had anything to do with those sorts of places, so I'm curious to hear about it for reference.”

“They get a group of goblins and have the students fight them on the training grounds. I was always just watching from the seats, though...”

“That actually sounds a little fancier than what I've got going here, y'know?”

Zelos had started talking to Celestina in a more casual tone—though he'd yet to realize that himself.

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In budgetary terms, creating golems was far more efficient than catching

goblins in cages and transporting them to the training grounds, when you considered all the work that involved. After all, the golems required nothing but some mana; they were otherwise free.

The problem, however, was that virtually no mage was of a high enough level to create that many golems. A single mage could, at best, expect to create around six, and that was already considered impressive. And when the mage in charge of that inevitably ran out of mana, they would collapse, reducing the golems to nothing but unmoving statues.

If enough mages worked together, they could create a legion of golems. But with the ongoing factional struggles, there was no way you'd get enough of them to join forces and work together on that. With that in mind, the academy had no choice but to capture and bring along monsters as best they could manage within their budget—with that alone then burning a sizable hole in their finances. You had to assume they were taking a big loss on that endeavor.

"So *that's* how they do things at the Istol Academy of Magic, huh? I wonder how their budget's going? I'd guess they're collecting a lot of donations, but I can't help but imagine they're in the red..."

Creston replied to Zelos's musings. "They come round and demand a great sum of money from us every year. But hmm... Having a great many mages work together to summon an army of golems for training, you say? It certainly sounds appealing, but with the factions how they are..."

"Are things really that bad between them? You don't even *need* funding to do all sorts of research."

Mages who couldn't decipher magic formulas were constantly groping around in the dark as they worked to improve on them.

Doing so would, of course, take a great deal of time—and unlike Zelos, those other mages had far too many things about magic that they didn't know.

"That may well be the case for you, but these other mages need to make a living, you know! So, yes, they very much do need money. Well, the bulk of it does end up being embezzled, though..."

"If the factions aren't getting results, why not just get rid of them? I feel like

things would be much easier if you could just use their poor performance as an excuse to hobble their power. There's no need for them if they're just sucking up money with nothing to show for it, right?"

"Well..." Creston sighed. "We certainly *could* take that into consideration. Especially if we were to point to the spell book you improved as a piece of evidence in our favor..."

"Just don't bring my name into it if you do, please. I'd rather not have to deal with all the fuss."

"I can promise to try my best, but it's often hard to say where information can leak out from. Especially given how much you stand out."

"I'm really just trying to live a boring old life here, you know..."

Appearancewise, at least, Zelos had the "boring" part down pat. But his actions were the polar opposite: showy to the extreme.

The basic spells from when he'd first started playing *Swords & Sorceries* were quite inefficient. But with Zelos using his improved versions of the spells—as well as his own custom creations—rumors were bound to spread as soon as anyone came across him.

"Even just attack spells can do all sorts of things if you control your mana right, you know? You can concentrate some mana to make a boat go faster, or use water magic to manage the sewers, or use earth magic to reduce the weight of luggage and make it easier to carry. Does nobody think to do that sort of thing around here?"

"You can truly use magic like that? When you mention attack spells, 'tis generally only combat that comes to mind—but I suppose your ideas would give even low-level mages more scope to earn a living. I shall keep them in mind."

"Magic all comes down to how you use it, really. If you get tunnel vision over a single application, you can end up missing out on other ways of looking at the same thing. I think it'd be best for everyone involved if mages did things that made people *want* to accept them in society."

"Certainly. There are far too many in the world now who merely obsess over

their political power. And the masses loathe them as a result. Not to mention, the problem will only continue to fester if we do not act now—of that I am certain. Maybe I *should* look to cripple the factions all at once...”

Within his mind, Zelos had a nagging doubt: *What if it's already too late?* But he kept it to himself.

After all, giving his thoughts to a representative of the country was already dangerously close to getting involved in politics. He wasn't *that* worried about speaking his mind in the context of a casual chat, but going any further would mean stepping into uncharted territory—a position from which he might find himself unable to return.

It all seemed like too much of a burden for a mere private tutor.

“Maybe you could set up some kind of organization where mages offer their services for various things. But, well, I guess the problem there is that there aren't actually all that many mages, right?”

“Getting it started up would be the time-consuming part. Especially seeing as almost all of our mages are focused on combat.”

“Generalized mages are stronger, you know? They can fight in close quarters as well, especially if they end up working as mercenaries.”

“That may well be so; the current Order of Mages avoids close-quarters combat at all costs, after all. I imagine they are rather poor at it.”

The Order of Mages was mostly just focused on supporting battles with attacks from the back lines and carrying out research. It was a given that they would be weaker than mercenary mages, who had more combat experience at the front lines.

After all, any mage working as a mercenary had to put their life and lifestyle alike on the line. It made them far more serious about their jobs—and while their levels depended on exactly how much they had experienced, they had a real hunger for life. Experiencing all sorts of battles was what nourished them. One way or another, they were a far more useful bunch than their power-hungry brethren, who spent their time merely sitting behind desks and moaning about things.

“The way I see it, you’ve got mercenary mages—uneducated but useful—on one hand, and a bunch of elite mages who’re weak and status-obsessed on the other. The country will probably go in a different direction depending on which of those you choose, I think.”

“Is it even possible for men who neglect their magic studies to be all that capable in combat?”

“Well, one way or another, it feels like you’d be better off without the kinds of useless mages who’ve only wormed their way into high positions through nepotism, right? And I think what you really want are mages who can properly coordinate with the Order of Knights.”

“Erm... We *are* a country of *magic*, you know.”

“Yes, and most of its mages are useless. Why do they even obsess over political power that much in the first place?”

While it was known as a “Kingdom of Magic,” the country acted more like a military state. Magic research was focused mainly on reinforcing the military, and the fruits of that magic research weren’t shared with the common people. All the mages researched were destructive spells, and they weren’t even really making any headway with those efforts—so it was easy to follow the logic that things would be better off without them. If anything, developing simple, easy-to-control spells that even farmers, merchants, and other commoners could use would provide a good source of earnings for the country.

The “problem,” of course, was that such spells becoming widespread would lower the value of the current crop of mages, which would likely make it harder for those obsessed with power to continue clinging to it. As things were, those who’d been born with power rose to the top, while everyone else fell from grace. By contrast, a system that could contribute to society as a whole would certainly be useful—but it was also a guarantee that the more power-hungry mages would do everything they could to prevent it from becoming a reality.

The spell books the academy used were already a filter of sorts, causing those with a limited amount of mana, like Celestina, to get left behind. And the education process itself was biased in all sorts of ways. However you looked at it, it was clear: the factions weren’t good for society as a whole.

As things stood, the country wouldn't be able to raise any truly talented mages—just mass-produce incompetent fools with biased upbringings.

“Well, no point thinking about it too much. I'm just a private tutor, after all.”

“You sound so uninterested in changing anything yourself. Why, if you were to become a leader here, things might actually start to move along rather well!”

“It's *because* I'm not involved that I'm able to say all this objectively. If I was working for the country, I'd have to choose my words much more carefully; if I screwed up, I could end up being killed for lèse-majesté. So I'll pass.”

Mages in court service had to be careful about all sorts of things. Zelos wanted nothing to do with that sort of lifestyle, and so he presented himself as an irresponsible vagabond. Those who led big organizations had all sorts of worries, and Zelos was fully aware that that just wasn't the kind of lifestyle for him.

“By the way, Celestina's been pretty quiet. I wonder what she's...”

Remembering the presence of his student, Zelos looked behind him.

He saw the girl with her chin resting on her hand, lost deep in thought as she analyzed her mock battle. She was muttering to herself in a quiet voice, giving careful consideration to what had worked well and what hadn't, and thinking on how to improve on her mistakes for next time.

While she was an illegitimate child, she had still been born into the ducal family. It seemed that this kind of thinking fit her better than expected; she looked to have plenty of potential for becoming a researcher if she so desired.

“Look at her. Lost in thought, walking around in dirty clothes. I'm not quite sure she fits the bill as a noble's daughter, but she'd get top marks as a researcher. Just look at that concentration.”

“Tell me honestly, Zelos. Do you think my Tina has talent?”

“Plenty of it. The rest will come down to her own effort—but we could end up seeing her blossom into a real genius, you know!”

“I'll look forward to it, then! Nothing would make me happier than seeing my granddaughter flourish.”

“Well, then, let’s try a bit of the good old carrot-and-stick approach...”

“Wh-What exactly do you mean to do?”

While Creston was happy to have brought on Zelos as a tutor, he did think the man’s training methods were a little harsh.

And now, a mischievous smile had begun to spread across that very same tutor’s face—he looked as if he’d had an *idea*.

It left Creston rather worried.

“Hey, Celestina?”

“Y-Yes?! Wh-What is it, Master?”

“By the end of these two months, if you’ve gotten your level up to 50, and at least three skills up to Level 30...I’ll teach you one of my original spells.”

“R-Really?!”

“Mmm hmm. One of the safe ones, mind you; nothing too dangerous. But it’s actually a pretty useful one.”

“What kind of spell is it? Can you at least give me a hint?”

“That can be a surprise for when you’ve reached your goal. It’s best to leave the fun for *after* you’re done with the hard work, right?”

By the standards of this world, most of Zelos’s spells were both out of the norm and incredibly dangerous. And the fact that he was intending to teach one of those to Celestina—albeit one of the few generically useful, relatively safe ones—meant a lot to the girl.

Essentially, it meant that she had been accepted as his apprentice.

Most magic-using noble children became the apprentices of famous mages; it was a sort of status symbol among high society. To be chosen from among those apprentices to be taught an original spell effectively meant becoming that mage’s successor, and often that student skyrocketed straight into a high position in the Order of Mages upon graduating the academy.

To Celestina, however, the prospect of being apprenticed to a mage as excellent as Zelos was in and of itself far more enticing than any meaningless

title. And being taught an original spell would be the proof that she had accomplished just that.

The promise of it all got the girl incredibly motivated—even more than she already had been.

“I’ll try my best! I promise you, I’m going to reach those targets!”

“Give it your best shot. First of all, though, you should probably get changed. You don’t want that mud to stain, do you?”

“Oh. You’re right. I-In that case, excuse me!”

“Well, she took the bait...”

Celestina ran off to change her clothes, clearly in extraordinarily high spirits.

*

“Just what sort of spell do you intend to teach her? For a mage such as yourself, I struggle to think of many options but attack magic...”

“Well, let’s see... How about we give it a whirl?”

“What? You mean to try it out *here*?”

“Yup. Try and shoot some magic at me, if you could. Ideally, I want you to hit me a bunch of times, with something strong enough that I can’t run away...”

In essence, he was telling Creston to attack him.

But judging by Zelos’s ability, Creston figured he didn’t need to worry for the man’s safety.

A daring smile came to the old noble’s face.

“Well, then...I won’t hold back, all right?”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

Both men’s expressions turned serious.

“Flames of purgatory, surge as dragons to ruin my foe. O wicked destroyers, ancestors from the underworld—burn all before you! Dragonferral Destruction!”

Creston himself was a mage—and in his younger years, he’d earned himself a

nickname as the “mage of purgatory.”

He excelled at fire-related magic, and he’d racked up countless military achievements for his endeavors in combat. Yet Zelos, standing across from him, stood quite casually as the dragons of fire flickered about.

These “dragons” started to split away from their flock—and it was then that they came at Zelos from all directions, a swell of flaming fangs and destruction.

“Divine Silver Barricade.”

In an instant, the flaming dragons were pierced by an invisible *something*—and then they were gone, disappearing in a flash.

A casual swing of Zelos’s arm had been enough to destroy all of the flaming dragons that had been headed toward him, cleaving them in half.

“Wh-What was... Oh! Was that a *shield* spell?!”

“That it is. It’s ‘Divine Silver Barricade’—a barrier that the caster can change into any shape they want.”

“It seems less of a shield and more of a sword! It would be no exaggeration to call it a mage-killer...”

One of the special characteristics of Divine Silver Barricade was that its caster was free to change its shape however they wished.

The spell used relatively little mana, and it was spectacular at countering projectile magic.

Many projectile spells worked by gathering up mana and changing its properties. And spells like Creston’s, which materialized that mana into a physical form, were vulnerable; their structural integrity could be disrupted with ease if you managed to pierce through them, causing the spell and its mana to disperse.

Zelos had formed countless little barriers around the area, like a wall of invisible blades—and those had then pierced through the flaming dragons as they rushed in, causing them to disperse. You could also use the same tactic in close-quarters battles, allowing even a mage who was poor with a sword to cut down their enemies at a relatively safe distance.

“This is an extraordinary spell, you know? I can scarcely imagine a mage standing a chance against it!”

“Well, you’re still done for if you get caught in the middle of a concentrated wide-area attack. But it’s a pretty effective spell, yeah, and you can use it as a trump card if you want. It’s fairly efficient too, and it’s not hard to make it work.”

“‘Not hard to make it work’? What do you mean by that?”

“You can use it to hit enemies who are too far away to get you with their weapons. After all, you’ll be safe as long as you can defeat your opponents before they get to you. It only works if you can control your mana properly, mind you.”

“Hmm... So you could attack with an invisible, extendable sword, if you wished?”

“Exactly. Its strength is going to depend on how much mana you use, but if your enemy hasn’t seen it before, it’s pretty much guaranteed to beat them. About the only opponent able to deal with it would be someone with amazing skills—or a mage who’s just so powerful that they can overwhelm you with brute force.”

While it was a rather annoying spell to deal with, the thought of his cute little granddaughter being able to master it had Creston unable to stifle a smile.

If Celestina managed to learn this spell, your average mage would stand no chance at beating her.

It was the perfect combination of offense and defense in a single barrier.

“I’m getting more and more excited to see what the future has in store for Tina. I wonder what sort of nickname she’ll earn for herself in the years to come...”

“Getting called by a nickname is kind of embarrassing, though, isn’t it? And going by her personality, I’m guessing that even if she *did* end up with one, she’d be too embarrassed by it to even leave her bed.”

“That could be a rather entertaining spectacle itself! I’m beginning to feel that

these next two months should be quite enjoyable.”

“Are you really okay with that?”

Creston’s love for his granddaughter knew no bounds. It was nearly on the level of mental illness.

Unable to do anything but sigh at the old man, Zelos started to head back inside the castle—leaving a huge pile of mud in the courtyard behind him.

Chapter 7: The Old Guy Heads into Town

It had been two weeks since Zelos had begun his life in this new world. He'd begun to get used to the environment—but at the same time, he'd realized that he had a couple of problems. Specifically, he had yet to get a proper look at the city he was in, and he didn't have any of this new world's money.

Since he'd reached the city, Zelos had spent most of his time and effort tutoring Celestina and working the fields at Creston's separate castle. He'd also spent a good while in the castle library, nose-deep in books on the lookout for more information about the new world he'd found himself thrown into. Outside of that, all he'd really done was occasionally cross swords with some of the knights for practice.

But how was he meant to live a proper life here if he had no idea how this world's denizens actually lived?

And so he'd decided—as if he were some aristocrat seeking enlightenment about the real world—to head into town without delay. Well, that was one reason; there was also the fact that he hadn't been able to smoke since he'd come here, and he was craving some cigarettes. In fact, that was probably his *main* reason.

Still, Zelos was determined, whatever his motivation. He opened the castle doors and headed outside.

“All right, then—guess I'm off! Wonder where I can get some smokes around here...”

Around the same time Zelos set out for his little journey, Creston was making his way toward the duke's castle—his main, official residence—and Celestina had lessons after her combat training, on top of which she was racked with muscle pain. Long story short, Zelos was free for the day.

He walked along the path, occasionally greeting any servants he passed, and made his way out of the castle's main gate.

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About half an hour after he left the castle, Zelos reached the edge of the city proper.

The city was nestled in a huge forest, and the city walls surrounded the forest itself; steep mountain cliffs towered over it from behind. In other words, it was a natural fort—there were no easy openings for invaders. The forested part of the city was bordered by a trade district, from which you could reach the industrial district—as well as the residential district, where the common people lived. Since it was located along an important trade route, the city was bustling with people.

At any rate, the city had been built right at the foot of the mountains, so it was rather hilly. Before it were towering defensive walls that incorporated the mountainside, and paths had specifically been carved out for the merchants who came and went by boat, allowing the city to prosper as a hub for trade. Of course, the number of people traveling through the city meant that it had its own mercenaries' guild as well, with plenty of jobs available for guarding or escorting.

Danger was always a possibility when traveling; criminals inevitably popped up from time to time, whether bandits and thieves along the roads or pirates along the rivers. Since the Order of Knights had only so much manpower to spare, it was customary to hire mercenaries to ward off any such criminals along your journeys. Yet despite that, the number of criminals stubbornly refused to fall. It was a constant back-and-forth between the law and the lawbreakers, then—the same as in any world.

Within the city walls, law and order were maintained—to an extent. But a single step outside and you were in no-man's-land, and all sorts of dangers lurked in the shadows.

It was enough to make the city's relative peace look like nothing but a fragile illusion.

*

"I guess I'll swing by the magic tool shop for starters. I've gotta sell these magic stones to get some money..."

Zelos had been given a map before he'd left. It was only a rough outline of the city's layout, though; it couldn't help him figure out where any specific places were.

Fortunately, the city had been built with a big focus on efficiency. So there were proper roads throughout, and maps of the area dotted the place, allowing any merchants there for the first time to get a quick handle on where everything was.

If there were any problem, it would've been the narrow alleyways hidden in the gaps between buildings. They tended to be filled with rather unpleasant sorts, who often tried to pull in merchants or residents and steal their valuables.

Zelos, however, had been warned about that sort of thing by the castle's servants before he'd left. And with that in mind, he decided not to go anywhere dangerous.

He might have been strong, but he still wanted to avoid getting into trouble. It was only natural.

With a spring in his step, Zelos made his way toward the magic tool shop. His heart was bursting with a childlike sense of adventure.

It didn't take him long to find the shop he was looking for. But when he did...

"I-Is this it? It feels kinda, uh...suspicious."

The magic tool shop was nestled between the city's commercial and industrial districts, looking out onto an intersection. But even without that, its eye-catching appearance made it easy to find. Put less charitably, it stuck out like a sore thumb; it would've been impossible to miss.

Since the shop was near the harbor, it was easy to bring in materials, and it was a common sight for the local inhabitants. But that wasn't what made it stand out.

Rather, the shop's whole exterior was painted black, putting it very much at odds with the look of its surroundings.

It just looked incredibly shady. You'd almost have expected a witch to burst

out the moment you opened the door. That was the sort of thing it put you in mind of.

It wasn't just the paint either. The place had some other *eccentric* design choices, to put it charitably—it was enough to leave you lost for words.

“Are those *heads*? I mean, okay, they're *doll* heads, but do they seriously think that's going to bring in any customers? They've even got a taxidermied goat head! If they really think people'll want to go inside this kind of shop, they've gotta be pretty clueless about how to run a business. Is the owner of this place all right in the head? More importantly, do I *really* want to go inside?”

Zelos could also see a crucified doll out the front, and a skull peeked out through the window.

The goat head—pinned to the shop's front door, its eyeballs popping out of its skull—felt like a particularly intense choice. Going for a creepy vibe was all well and good, but this place was taking it too far.

Zelos could scarcely believe that customers were even welcome here.

GAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

The “chime” at the front of the store sounded more like a scream.

As Zelos stood frozen outside the door, a handful of people who looked to be mercenaries made their way out of the shop. All wore complicated expressions on their faces, and a number of them looked incredibly indignant.

The storefront alone was making every mistake that a retail store could. And judging by this group of disgruntled customers, the full experience didn't look much more promising.

Still, Zelos needed to do something about his financial situation if he wanted to be able to buy anything. As bizarre as the store looked, he had no choice but to open the door and head inside. And so he did—albeit with great reluctance.

“Welcome~!”

Working inside was a bespectacled girl who looked like a witch. Her cheery greeting, however, was the polar opposite of what Zelos had expected, given the shop's creepy aesthetics.

But surprisingly, the *inside* of the shop looked completely normal, with all sorts of magic tools displayed neatly in cases. It made the place's outside appearance all the more baffling.

"Hi. Do you buy magic stones, by any chance?"

"Magic stones, is it? How many do you have?"

"About two hundred from goblins, fifty from high goblins, fifteen from goblin mages, and one from a goblin king."

The girl took a second to respond. And then: "Are you insane? There's no way you could have that many!"

"Nope. Perfectly sane. Here, take a look."

Zelos handed the magic stones—which he'd previously placed in a separate leather bag—over to the witchy-looking girl, who proceeded to take out a magnifying glass right in front of him and start carefully appraising the stones, one by one. While he was waiting, Zelos figured he might as well browse the store's collection of magic tools. But none of them impressed him. He could make better himself—a realization that left him feeling a little let down.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. While he'd been known as one of *Swords & Sorceries's* Destroyers—the game's strongest players—he'd also been a crafter, creating all sorts of magic tools for people. He took another look at the store's own items, appraising them properly this time, but they were all just basic support items, the types that would offer a minor enhancement to a subset of the user's physical capabilities, or a small boost to their mana pool.

Not to mention, the items here were consumable. Once the mana within their magic stone ran out, they'd be reduced to pieces of junk.

It wasn't like that was an unavoidable issue: you could embed magic formulas inside magic tools, which would let them take on more mana and become semipermanent. None of *these* tools, however, had been given that treatment. Zelos could appreciate the craftsmanship that had gone into each tool's appearance, but that was really all they had going for them.

There was no reason whatsoever for him to buy any of these.

“Sir? Where did you steal these magic stones from? Stones of this size and color must have come from the Far-Flung Green Depths!”

“That’s a pretty rude way to start things off. I didn’t *steal* them—they’re all from monsters I hunted myself. As you’d expect.”

That was a pretty big accusation—and what was more, she’d leveled it at Zelos without any evidence at all. With that attitude, it was hard to believe she was employed in customer service. Zelos had simply come to sell the very magic stones that the shop needed for its magic tools; he’d never expected to be labeled a thief for doing so. If things kept going south, it would only have been natural for the customer, whoever they were, to get seriously angry and boycott the store for life.

“You’re lying! There’s no way some lousy gray-robed mage could head into the Far-Flung Green Depths and come out alive! So spit it out. Where did you steal these stones from?!”

“Are you really going to treat me like a thief without any proof? I just beat the monsters. It’s that simple. Well, I didn’t go out looking for them, mind you; it only happened because I wandered into the forest by accident.”

“You ‘wandered into’ the forest? Wh-What? Don’t tell me—are you a mage from some other country?”

“Yeah. I came to this city about a week ago. I’ve been staying at the duke’s second house—Creston, yeah? He was the one who told me about this place.”

If Zelos didn’t handle this transaction with care, it’d be over. He figured he needed to negotiate with strength and confidence—and so he’d opted for a straightforward power play, capitalizing on the duke’s name.

The shopkeeper’s face paled in an instant.

“Wh-What? Are you working at Sir Creston’s castle?”

“Yep. I just happened to meet him while I was traveling, and he was kind enough to offer me a room to stay in. Is that a problem?”

“Are you serious?”

“Serious as serious can be! But if you don’t believe me, feel free to ask him

and check for yourself.”

“Y-You’re lying! There’s no way a man like him would show favor to some shady-looking mage like you!”

This wasn’t how an employee should be speaking to a customer.

You could almost admire the girl’s determination, keeping up this line of questioning in spite of everything. But that determination alone wouldn’t be enough to get her anywhere.

Zelos let out a sigh. “Why are you so desperate to treat me like a criminal? And why are you being so *stubborn* about it? If you’re going to accuse me, then shouldn’t you at least try to show some proof? Even detectives in novels don’t just run up and start accusing people of crimes unless they’ve got some concrete evidence, you know?!”

“Ngh...”

Though Zelos was still rather annoyed with the situation, he gradually calmed down a little and gave the girl an honest, matter-of-fact explanation of things. But as she listened, she began to tremble, harder and harder. After all, each part of Zelos’s story was an indirect reminder that her accusation had no legs to stand on.

While Zelos did clearly *look* kind of suspicious, her only way of figuring out whether he was really staying with the ducal family would be to go there directly, in person, and ask for an answer. And if it turned out that the man *was* telling the truth, she’d have been insulting an esteemed guest of the former duke.

If she screwed up, she could very well end up imprisoned for life, or even executed. She was checkmated.

“Sure is a lot of noise coming from out here. Can you stop making such a fuss while I’m trying to work?”

“M-Manager?!”

“Kuhti! Are you accusing a customer of stealing again? I wish you’d stop trying to act out your detective novels in real life. Your behavior’s already driving away

enough customers as it is! Seriously, I'll dock your pay if you keep it up, okay?"

A woman had come out from the back of the store. She was the manager, apparently—though she somewhat more resembled a sex worker.

Wearing a red dress that revealed plenty of cleavage, she didn't look like much of a mage at all. If you had to guess what sort of business she ran based on her appearance, you'd struggle to think of much beyond "nighttime entertainment."

To put it positively, she was voluptuous, even captivating—to put it negatively, shameless.

"He's got a gray robe, though! And he's saying that he brought back these magic stones from the Far-Flung Green Depths! Even if he *did* come from some other country, that'd be impossible. So he *must* have stolen them, right? It's elementary, Inspector!"

"I'm not your 'inspector.' And, well..." She paused for a moment. "Kuhti? I think this man's telling the truth."

"Huh...?"

"I think he's keeping it dirty on purpose, but that robe looks incredible. That didn't come from your average monster..."

"You probably don't want to ask me what exactly it's made from. You might end up doubting your sanity."

"Let me guess, then. Is it a behemoth, perhaps? It's my first time seeing something made from a legendary monster."

For a moment, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

"Wh— *Whaaaaaaaaaat?!'*"

"No idea what you're talking about," Zelos replied. "It's just your average old dirty robe."

"Let's leave it at that. I'd rather not die yet..."

"Glad to hear it. There's nothing quite as unpleasant as having someone try and pry into your life, you know."

“I feel the same.”

The pair glanced over at Kuhti, who was still bewildered. They could tell that they’d reached an understanding of sorts.

About the only people with equipment made from behemoth materials were heroes. The stuff of legends.

Any mage wearing that sort of equipment... Well, the manager’s intuition told her there was more here than met the eye.

“So, about buying these magic stones of yours... I’ll throw in a little extra for you, seeing as our employee here was so rude to you. How’s that sound? Are you still up for doing business with us?”

“That won’t be a problem, but...” Zelos hesitated, trying to find the right words. “Are you really okay with her? I’m not sure it’s my place to say so, but a shopkeeper who’s that rude to customers can’t be great for your reputation as a business.”

“Trust me, she’s given me plenty of headaches already. I keep warning her, but she never listens... And, well, it’s too late for our reputation.”

“‘Too late’? Oh,” said Zelos after a pause. “My condolences. Couldn’t you just hire someone else, though?”

“Who’d be willing to come work for a shop that looks like *this*? Trust me, even *she*’s worth keeping around.”

“Ah. So you *do* realize it. Why don’t you do something about it, then?”

Zelos wanted to be more direct—*if you know how it looks, then why not make the place look less horrifying?*—but he figured the store’s aesthetics could be blamed on the manager’s own questionable sense of taste. She probably had no interest in fixing it.

Kuhti, meanwhile, was hunched over next to said manager, mumbling to herself on repeat. “No way... There’s no way...”

Like employee, like manager.

“Anyway, setting that aside, I’d appreciate it if you could buy these magic stones off me. I’m completely broke. Not even enough money to get myself

some cigarettes. It's a real problem, honestly, with a nicotine addiction like mine..."

"Again, I really am sorry for my employee's rudeness. Give us a minute, please; we'll prepare some money right away. Kuhti, how long are you going to sit there moping? Get to work!"

"O-Of course!"

Panicking, Kuhti retreated to the back of the store. It wasn't long until Zelos could hear her voice again, though, and she sounded as if she were counting something.

She was probably in a rush to count up how much they'd need to pay Zelos for the stones.

Everything Zelos saw only made him worry more and more for this shop.

Standing at the counter, the manager picked up an especially large magic stone—and as she did, her expression started to melt into an enraptured smile.

A smile made rather erotic by her overall appearance.

"What a lovely magic stone. Even just touching it gets me wanting to make something. Heh heh heh heh..."

"I-I'm glad to hear it. It might have all been a coincidence, but at least it sounds like *something* good came out of me beating those things."

"You're a mage too, right? Don't you make your own magic tools?"

"I do if I need to. But, well, I'm freeloading at someone else's home at the moment. If I manage to get a home of my own, with a nice field, then...yeah, it might be nice to spend the rest of my years making some bits and pieces. Just as a hobby, mind you."

"Sounds like you won't end up being a business rival, then. That's nice to hear. Especially since I get the feeling you'd end up making some pretty insane items..."

A listless, somehow alluring expression made its way across the manager's face, and she let out a sigh. It looked like she was seriously relieved.

She was a more capable mage than her appearance let on.



“I’ve finished calculating! I’ve got a price for all of your magic stones.”

“How much?”

“Um... 2,498,000 gol.”

It sounded like Zelos had struck it rich.

“I feel like that’s an awful lot of money, but, uh...”

“I told you, right? There’s some extra in there to make up for my employee’s rudeness—and most of the total value comes from the goblin king’s magic stone. I never thought I’d be able to get hold of such a big one...≡”

The manager’s cheeks flushed as she held up the largest of the magic stones.

Zelos was starting to think she had a screw or two loose in her head.

“All right. I’ll be off, then. I’ll bring you some more magic stones if I get my hands on any good ones.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it. The name’s Belladonna, by the way; I’m a mage. I’ve made a bit of a name for myself in magic tools.”

“I’m Zelos. I’ll drop by again if I feel like it.”

“Thanks for your business!”

Money now in hand, Zelos was feeling rather pleased with himself. But he tried his best to look calm and collected as he left.

Back inside the store, Belladonna let out a deep sigh once she was certain Zelos was gone. Then she spun around to glare at Kuhti, putting a silent pressure on the girl.

“Wh-What is it, Manager...?”

“*Kuhti!* What the hell were you thinking, trying to pick a fight with a monster like that?!”

“I-I’m sorryyyyyyy!”

“I felt my spine freeze the moment I looked at the guy! He is the *last* kind of person you want to make an enemy of, you hear me? He’s got to be *insanely* powerful...”

“But his robe was gray! Doesn’t that make him one of the lowest-ranked mages? I can’t imagine any mage from another country wanting to come to our shop, and even if they did, I don’t think they’d look that suspicious...”

“Come *on*! The guy was *clearly* dangerous, however you look at him. Where were you even looking?! The world’s a big place, you know. Behemoths have a gray hide, and you can’t dye it. Plus, he’s made that thing dirty on purpose. To make him seem like less of a big deal than he really is.”

It wasn’t as if Belladonna had gotten a direct look at Zelos’s power. Just the traces of the mana swirling around him, however, were enough to let her know. It was the first thing she’d ever seen that had managed to shock her.

Every good mage needed to be sensitive to mana. And having a skill that let you sense the presence of mana would get you even further.

In Belladonna’s case, it was the Detect Mana skill. It had allowed her to see the incredible density of mana around Zelos—a sight that had left her needing to hide her shock and put on a calm front as she dealt with the man.

All the while, she’d been burdened with an overwhelming sense of fear and inferiority. It was clear to her: she’d stand no chance against this foreign mage.

“I-Is he really that amazing? He just looked like some random vagrant!”

“He’d be strong enough to kill you with a single breath. If possible, I’d rather never meet him again...”

“*Eep!*”

“It’s too late to get scared *now*! If this had been a battle, you would’ve been long dead by this point, you know?!”

Belladonna was teasing the girl on purpose. Trying to make her taste even a smidgen of the fear she’d felt herself.

“Jeez... Where’d the duke’s old man even pick up a monster like that? I feel like I’ve lost a year of my life...”

Her frustration had her talking rather disrespectfully about old Creston, who happened to be an acquaintance of hers.

Zelos decided to relax a little by taking a detour to the market on his way back. When he got there, however, it didn't take him long to reach a realization: things in this world were dirt cheap.

You could just about live for a month on a hundred gol.

Prices were about the same as in prewar Japan, and food was especially cheap. Zelos surmised he wouldn't need to worry about his day-to-day expenses for the time being. Metals, however, were actually fairly expensive; even just iron sold for quite a high price.

This was because mines and other such places where you could dig up precious metals were often filled with monsters, meaning you couldn't gather those metals without exposing yourself to quite a lot of danger. Given both the demand and the need to keep miners safe, mercenaries were hired from the mercenaries' guild to protect the miners, who would only begin their work once any monsters had been defeated and the area was confirmed to be safe.

The need to pay both the miners and the contracted mercenaries meant that mining endeavors required quite a lot of capital, ultimately driving up the price of metals. In addition, there were only so many mines. Then there were the transportation expenses as well, all of which only served to further drive up prices.

Of course, these same factors meant that prices were also high for the kinds of materials needed to make ceramics. And things like ceramic tableware were expensive as a result—encouraging the common people to use wooden tableware instead. It seemed like every country had the same sort of struggles with securing metal resources, and so the merchants' guild had controls on metal sales to maintain a balance of sorts and keep things fair between countries. There was a good number of countries that had their own domestic mines, but those countries then tended to suffer from food shortages. And for the trade guild, which managed the distribution of goods, both war and bandits were further sources of major frustration.

While war could certainly be profitable, only a handful of merchants would stand to prosper from it. And from the perspective of the trade guild, it would be a terrible development—something that wreaked havoc on their business

partners, workers, and supply chains. The guild therefore thoroughly disliked the types of nobles and merchants who fanned the flames of war. If you wanted to start a war, you needed to spend a lot of time carefully planning things out, making sure you had the infrastructure to be self-sufficient for food, and gradually stocking up on all sorts of weapons. Only *then* would it be feasible.

Even that, though, wasn't necessarily enough to *win* a war. So it was fortunate that times were currently peaceful—leaving aside the perpetual war of information, all spies and secret dealings behind the scenes. Still, it was hard to say how long that peace would last. It sounded like there was a decent chance of a civil war breaking out, after all...

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“That’s *gotta* be bad for business. Is this country really okay?”

“Who knows? The royals have their line of succession laid out, at least, but beyond that...”

“What about the Order of Knights and the Order of Mages? I’ve heard they don’t get along that well. Especially the higher-ups.”

“Sure sounds like that, yeah. I’m just hoping neither of ’em tries to start a coup in the army.”

“They’d *better* not! I just want to live a nice, quiet life.”

Zelos was chatting with a merchant at a street stall, trying to get a feel for the country’s domestic affairs as he went.

Gathering this sort of information would be essential if he wanted to make any informed decisions on how to spend his future here; any little scrap of information could be the difference between life and death. Especially in a place like this, where the tiniest mistake could lead to him getting caught up in some sort of huge trouble.

“By the way, are ya gonna buy one of my meat skewers or not?”

“What kind of meat are we talking? It certainly *smells* nice...”

“It’s from a wild Holstein! They’ve been all over the place lately. So people went out to hunt ’em as a bit of a cull, ya see.”

“Oh? I know they’re famous for their milk, but how’s their meat?”

“Well, ya can eat the murder buffalo—and that’s a cow, same as the Holstein. So I figure the Holstein should be fine to eat too!”

Zelos bought a single skewer to try it out, and wasted no time stuffing it all into his mouth.

The moment he bit into the meat, its juices came bursting out. They had a delicious umami, which was only further amplified by a sauce of stewed fruits and spices.

“Th-This is a treasure trove! A treasure trove of *meat juiiice!*”

Amazed by the taste, Zelos couldn’t stop himself from referencing a particular Osakan comedian he remembered from Japanese TV.

“Y-You all right there, mister?”

“Yeah, don’t mind me. It just tasted so good; I couldn’t help myself. I’ll buy fifty more, please.”

“*Fifty?!?*”

And so Zelos bought himself fifty skewers of meat. He continued to walk around the market humming, buying up various ingredients and spices. It was then that he saw it: a sign modeled after a pipe. The middle-aged man stopped in his tracks, a jolt of electricity running up his spine.

“I-Is this a tobacconist?! Am I actually going to be able to get myself some smokes?!”

Zelos was a heavy smoker. A connoisseur of tobacco, to put it kindly.

So far, however, he hadn’t been able to get his hands on any cigarettes in this new world. It was a problem that had left him unable to fully relax, and he was even getting withdrawal symptoms. By this point, he was desperate for some tobacco. So now—with a tobacconist appearing before him—he didn’t waste a moment.

He opened the door and made his way into the shop.

Inside were shelves filled with a vast number of drawers, as well as cases

displaying countless pipes. They were clearly being sold as something to *enjoy*—a realization that left Zelos unable to hide his delight. Back on Earth, society had started to push harder and harder against smoking; those who enjoyed their tobacco were only able to indulge while feeling ashamed of themselves, either hunched in the corner of a room or shoved outside. It was rare to find anywhere with a proper smoking room nowadays.

“Hi there. What can I get ya?”

“Some smokes. Preferably cigarettes, if you’ve got some?”

There were all sorts of devices here for smoking; you could put your tobacco in a water pipe, a Japanese-style smoking pipe, or a more Western-style pipe, or simply get some cigars. Cigarettes were the most popular option among the general public; full cigars and pipes were more of a hobby enjoyed by merchants and nobles, while water pipes tended to be more popular among royalty and priests. Zelos, for his part, didn’t hesitate to go for the cigarettes.

“Guessing you’re a heavy smoker, yeah? And a pretty serious one at that.”

“Oh—you can tell? To tell you the truth, I ran out of smokes recently, and I haven’t been able to relax. It’s my first time in this city too, so I don’t have a usual store or anything.”

“Heh. Well, we’ve got a pretty darn good lineup of stuff! What kind of smokes do you want? Even if you’re just talking cigarettes, they can taste different depending on where the tobacco’s made, after all.”

“I prefer something a little salty. I’d rather not have anything too sweet, and...I guess that leaves the aroma?”

“Hmm. How about something from Amehl? I can even give ya a sample, if ya want.”

“Sure, that’d be great. It’s hard to know exactly what I want when you’ve got so many options, after all.”

The shopkeeper took a selection of different tobacco leaves from the shelves and started to lay out a small amount of each in front of Zelos. Zelos responded by taking out a traditional Japanese smoking pipe from his inventory.

“That’s a weird-looking pipe you’ve got there, mister. I like it, though. Good stuff.”

“I barely ever use it. It’s the best way to really enjoy the taste, though.”

“You seem pretty particular about your tobacco. Just my kind of man! Here—I’ve put out a bunch of types that I reckon should fit your tastes.”

Zelos put a few tobacco leaves into his pipe, then lit it. It was his first smoke in a fair while—and he made sure to enjoy it to its fullest.

Once he was done, he picked out some leaves he liked from the selection, going through them with great care to find ones that suited his tastes.

“Some from Nolmat, and some from Isarak, eh? You sure do have an eye for the good ones. I’m starting to like ya even more.”

“These are just the sorts I go for, I guess. The stuff from Sambel was a little strong for me—might’ve enjoyed it when I was a bit younger, though.”

“Yeah, that stuff’s all about the aroma. The taste’s a different story. It probably *is* a bit too strong for someone your age.”

“Can I get you to make me some cigarettes with the Nolmat and Isarak leaves? They’re pretty nice.”

Having finally found his beloved tobacco, Zelos was more than happy to hand over his money here.

“Roger that. Heck, I’ll even do it for free! I’d love to turn ya into a regular, after all.”

As he spoke, the shopkeeper disappeared into the back of the shop. Zelos, meanwhile, just relished what had been his first hit of tobacco in a while. Eventually, the shopkeeper returned, holding a paper bag.

“I’ll give ya a discount this time. It’d be great to get ya coming back.”

“Well, you’ve certainly given me some good stuff. I’d be happy to stop by every now and then. Anyway, see you around!”

“Thanks! Look forward to seeing ya again!”

Zelos left the store behind, his beloved tobacco safely in hand.

Zelos was strolling through the downtown area with a cigarette in his mouth. His high spirits had him forgetting his manners.

Whether his first smoke in a while had helped him perk up or he was just in a good mood, he roamed around the city with a light step, exploring what it had to offer. All of a sudden, however, he realized he was lost.

Everything he'd seen of the city so far had been the downtown hustle and bustle. But the street he stood in now was quiet.

Old houses lined the street, and adults and orphans sat about, all wearing morose expressions. A good deal of them looked like they could've been small-time thugs—there was a dark glitter in their eyes, as if they were scanning the street for a mark.

“Is this a slum? No... The city's old town?”

The roads seemed too well maintained for it to be a slum. At the same time, however, it didn't promise the sort of law and order he'd seen in the rest of the city.

People Zelos passed by shot suspicious gazes at him. From time to time, one of them would say something to a man sitting on the ground, only to disappear around a corner. Zelos could feel some sort of fuss coming on, he was sure of it—but without any clue where he was, he couldn't really do anything about it.

The map that Zelos had received only showed about a third of the city. And if this place even *was* on the map, he had no way of knowing where it would be.

“The layout of this place seems pretty complicated. For starters, I guess I should try and get a better idea of where I am...”

Either way, he'd realized that just standing there and twiddling his thumbs would get him nowhere. He resolved to keep walking, no real destination in mind. Eventually, he reached a public square with a fountain. But the fountain was long dried up; the pool was a shadow of its former glory. The houses around it were just as dilapidated, and none of them showed any signs of life. The whole area seemed as if it were decaying—the polar opposite of the thriving streets that Zelos had been strolling through not too long ago.

Munching on one of the now-cold meat skewers he'd bought from the stall earlier, he continued walking, keeping a careful eye on his surroundings.

"Hmm. What's this...? Three people? No—four?"

One of Zelos's skills—Detect Presence, a common skill among assassins—alerted him to the presence of a small group of people tailing him.

Right away, he could tell: they were awfully bad at shadowing him. Even an amateur would've fared better.

When he went down a back lane, his stalkers milled around in confusion, unsure how to respond. They clearly had no idea what they were doing. Zelos was starting to get the idea they were children.

It wouldn't be surprising for an abandoned place like this to have some street urchins. And if he *was* being tailed by children, Zelos was curious to know what they wanted him for. Nonchalant, he took another skewer out of the bag, lifting it to his mouth.

Suddenly: "Hey, Pops!"

One of the children had made the first move, calling out to him himself. Zelos turned to face the voice and saw a child with dirty clothes and a radiant smile looking straight up at him.

"'Pops'? C'mon, at least call me 'mister' or something."

"Means the same thing anyway, right, Pops?"

"Eh, I guess. Doesn't feel quite right, though... Anyway, what do you want?"

"Gimme some meat!"

The red-haired kid had come straight out with a request—all zest, not a lick of restraint.

She looked like a girl, but under all that dirt—not to mention the cuts all over her skin—it was hard to tell. It wasn't impossible she was a boy instead.

Either way, her tanned skin had a healthy gleam to it, but she was also fairly thin.

"Meat? What for?"

“C’mon! Cheapskate!”

“I mean, I don’t mind handing out some meat to a kid I’ve never seen before. But what if that encourages you, and you make a habit out of it, and you start pestering other people? I’d feel bad for your parents.”

“We don’t got any parents. We live at the orphanage!”

“The orphanage? Is there really one in this sort of place?”

“Yup! The duke gives us money.”

Apparently there was an orphanage here under the duke’s control. But the law and order in the area didn’t seem great—it was just about the last sort of place you’d want to raise a child.

Worst-case scenario, they’d end up being recruited as reserves for some sort of criminal gang, and before too long, the area would get even worse.

“Hmm. How many of you kids are there?”

“Four, if ya count me. Oh, and one more back at the orphanage.”

“You’re so small...”

“Hey, I’m thirteen! I’m a proper adult!”

“You’re kidding! You’ve *got* to be younger than that...”

She seemed young, however you looked at her. Her growth had probably been stunted by malnourishment.

The thought of this girl trying her best to live in such a harsh environment brought a tear to Zelos’s eye. But he tried his best to keep it together.

“Wouldn’t your caretaker get angry at you if you ate in this sort of place? Wait—you’re at an orphanage, so there *is* some kind of adult taking care of you, right?”

Zelos didn’t mind showing these kids some charity, but the problem would be what happened afterward.

If he gave them something without thinking about the consequences, their caretaker back at the orphanage might think the kids had stolen it from someone. He couldn’t bear to think of that happening.

He had to be the sensible adult here.

“We’ll bring some back to the sister too, you know!”

“I feel like that could end up making her even angrier... Hmm. How about you guide me back to your orphanage so I can meet her myself?”

“Aww. Whyyyy?”

The girl voiced her dissatisfaction in a rather childish way for a thirteen-year-old.

In any case, Zelos had his reasons. Even if *he* were happy to give some skewers away to the kids, would this “sister” back at the orphanage really believe them if they said, “Some guy gave them to us”? That was what worried him.

If she ended up thinking that the kids had stolen from someone, she might end up doing something that’d leave a deep scar on their hearts.

That would’ve weighed terribly on his conscience, and he didn’t think he could call himself a proper adult if he didn’t help the kids out with that as best he could. Plus, these kids were orphans; they had even more of a right to be happy than anyone else, he thought.

“Anyway, I’ll make sure to explain everything to her. Besides, carrying such a big bag all by yourselves, you might trip—then the skewers would be ruined!”

“Five-second rule! As long as we picked ’em up in five seconds, we’d still be able to eat ’em!”

“Yeah! You worry too much, Pops!”

“Our stomachs aren’t *that* weak!”

“Wait, ‘the five-second rule’? That’s a thing here as well?!”

Children were tough. Still, it all made Zelos a little worried about their eating habits.

“Even then, I feel like you might start to pick at them before your dinnertime; it’s probably best I go with you. Plus, this part of town seems kind of dangerous. Someone might steal them from you before you got back, right?”

“Nah. Everyone ’round here’s nice!”

“Yeah. Just not to strangers.”

“They give us veggies sometimes.”

“Don’t you trust people, Pops?”

The kids had too much energy for Zelos to deal with. But more importantly, it seemed like this old town area might’ve been a kinder place than Zelos had given it credit for.

What the kids were saying—that the townsfolk here had only been giving him those cold stares because he was an outsider—seemed reasonable enough, he thought.

“All right, all right. Can you guide me to the orphanage now? I’ll explain everything for you once we’re there. If you can be good kids and show me the way, you’ll be having skewers for dinner tonight, mmkay?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” The four kids responded all as one.

“Where’d you even learn to say that...?”

It seemed like the kids had picked up some weird figures of speech from *somewhere*.

Zelos promised himself this: if he managed to get married and have some kids of his own, he was going to watch his mouth around them. Not that that’d stop them picking up weird slang from elsewhere, of course...

Regardless, the four children made their way back to the orphanage, showing Zelos the way.

He had yet to know that this would be the start of a long relationship with these children.

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As Zelos got closer to the orphanage, he noticed he could see Creston’s secondary residence in the distance.

Though the place was made to look like a castle from the outside—living up to the kind of image one would expect of a noble’s residence—its location actually

made it pretty easy to see from the old town. Zelos had thought he'd gotten lost trying to find his way back, but seeing the castle now, he realized he hadn't actually been far off. He was relieved to know it'd be fairly easy to make it back there from where he was now.

Now that he had a better idea of where he was, Zelos realized that the orphanage seemed to be outside of both the new town and old town areas. He felt like it must have been a fairly inconvenient location for raising children.

You needed to take a roundabout path to get into the market, going on a detour through the old town and the new town on your way. And despite what the children had said, Zelos couldn't help but have some worries about the safety of the old town area.

After all, he'd spotted slave traders when he was making his way around the city—that meant slavery was openly practiced in this world. So it wouldn't be out of the question for kidnappers or other such lowlives to be lurking around.

If there *were* those sorts of criminals around, orphans would be the perfect targets; it was entirely possible that someone would be willing to abduct children and sell them off. For what it was worth, the law placed limits on who could be enslaved. For example, the person in question had to consent; it was something that criminals could accept as an alternative to other punishments, or that an innocent adult who couldn't support themselves through work would resign themselves to. But there was the chance of being sold into prostitution, or as a slave for fulfilling other sexual desires.

A slave's value was determined by their age and sex—and while illegal slave trading was banned on the surface, that, too, was still carried out, albeit behind closed curtains. The supposed legal restrictions didn't seem to be enforced all that strictly either, providing the illegal slave trade with a sort of tacit consent from above.

One way or another, orphans were seen as useless. If they weren't given an education, they'd likely have nowhere to turn but some kind of gang. Educating them at the orphanage before letting them out into society required money, though—especially compared to selling them off as slaves, which would take no time or money at all. Zelos let out a deep sigh, muttering to himself about how

unfair the world could be.

Zelos was against slavery on a fundamental level. He'd gotten a general idea of the situation back at Creston's castle, where he'd spent his time gathering information about the world. It was just common sense, at least to Zelos; he'd grown up with the modern world's standards. Still, he was aware that his notion of common sense wasn't necessarily seen as such in this new world.

Nonetheless, he couldn't accept it. He refused to see these kids have their futures stolen away for a few coins.

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"Okay, Pops! It's just over there!"

The red-haired girl was pointing toward a particularly dilapidated-looking church.

Zelos figured it was probably the orphanage. But just as he'd made that connection, he realized he could see a well-dressed young man standing out front, flanked by knights. Squaring off against them was a woman in her late teens, wearing a religious habit.

"Ugh. It's *them*."

"Who are they? They look like some kind of nobles..."

"The rich-looking guy's one of the duke's sons. He's really mean."

Which would make him Creston's grandson, and Celestina's older brother.

Seriously? How stereotypical. Is this some kind of "fated encounter" or something?

Zelos was getting the growing sense that he'd walked in on a pain-in-the-ass situation. He would've liked to avoid it, if at all possible—but he didn't want these kids thinking he was on the side of that nasty-sounding noble.

All I want is to live a nice, quiet life...

Regardless, Zelos knew he had no real way out of the situation now. He let out a deep, deep sigh, sounding almost as if he'd given up on life altogether.

This would be the day he reached a sad realization: he was doomed to get

caught up in messes like this, and this was only just the beginning.

Chapter 8: The Old Guy Interrupts a Young Love

A young man stood boldly in front of the orphanage. His name was Zweit von Solistia—son of the Duke of Solistia, who ruled over this city.

Two knights flanked the young noble, guarding him as he quarreled with the sister from the church-cum-orphanage.

Zweit was a student in the high school division of the Istol Academy of Magic. His grades there were excellent, but they were balanced out by his bad behavior—he was a real problem student, and it had earned him the loathing of his teachers. Part of this behavior, however, could be traced back to the factional rivalry that played out at the academy. Each faction of mages recruited new members there under the guise of socializing, and Zweit belonged to one of the two largest factions.

One of these two was known as the Wiesler faction; the other, the Saint-Germain faction.

The Wiesler faction was home to a long list of combat mages who specialized in attack magic. Most of their research centered around military strategy—making them the faction most at odds with the Order of Knights. In contrast, the Saint-Germain faction prioritized research in and of itself, and gave the country many mages who specialized in theory. Most of *their* research was focused on the creation of spells and potions; they worked tirelessly to explore the broader mysteries of magic. Each faction, in its own way, had made significant contributions to the country.

Or at least, that was how things *used* to be. Nowadays, both factions were obsessed with their political influence above all else, and they often found themselves at odds with each other as a result. Of course, they shared the Order of Knights as a common foe—but that was a cold war of sorts, not something they could make public. Zweit was part of the Wiesler faction, and his status as the eldest son of the ducal family meant that he was given favorable treatment.

Still, it was his abilities that had put him at the top of his class; there was no trickery to that. But that knowledge had done nothing but fan the flames of his bad behavior. It had only become *particularly* egregious in the last two or three years.

Seeing as Creston had also belonged to the Wiesler faction, Zweit saw himself following in the footsteps of his grandfather, the famous “mage of purgatory.” Creston’s many illustrious achievements had his grandson longing to live up to him.

However, all the high praise that had been showered upon Zweit had made him rather full of himself. As a result, he was now on the verge of becoming a truly horrid person.

Those who knew Zweit well found his behavior to be a little baffling at times—not that *he* was aware of their misgivings.

*

Zweit was the heir to the current duke; he had already come of age. Then last summer, he had laid eyes on a certain holy sister who looked after children at an orphanage, and it had been love at first sight. Ever since that day, he’d tried his best to court her—though it hadn’t taken long for his efforts to devolve into following her around and harassing her.

By this point, he was essentially a stalker.

Zweit’s behavior was an example of what this world usually called “Angel’s Mischief” or “Cupid’s Whim”: a biological phenomenon whereby the mana inside someone’s body reacted to the mana wavelength of someone of the opposite sex. On the street, the symptoms of this were also known as “love syndrome.” In layman’s terms, it essentially made you go into heat.

This would normally make the person in question desperate to court whoever was most compatible with them. Zweit’s behavior, however, went beyond what was normal.

“Stop resisting already; I am *going* to make you mine. How much more time do you intend to waste at this orphanage?”

“I intend to devote my life to this orphanage. It’s what I’ve chosen—for

myself. Why should I have to do what you say?!”

“I wonder how long you’ll play hard to get? I’m not the type of man to give up on something I want—I *will* get my hands on it, *whatever* it takes. And that includes you, Luceris.”

*

Luceris had been found and raised by the orphanage.

Her only childhood memories were of life at the orphanage. She remembered nothing of her parents.

To her, the orphanage was her home—and she’d always wanted to raise younger orphans herself, to pay back the kindness of the priests who’d raised her.

Back then, there had still been friars and priests around to take care of orphaned children. But the situation changed when Luceris finished her training and returned to the orphanage.

The orphanage was financed by grants from the state, which appointed priests from the Faith of the Four Gods to run the orphanage in its stead. Luceris, then, had been chosen to help out the orphanage as an apprentice priestess, as well as to provide very cheap healing to people in the neighborhood as part of her training.

But it was then that Zweit had appeared. Having always wished to become a champion of the people, he viewed Luceris—who was healing the people for next to no compensation—as a saint. He had promptly decided to make her his own. Unfortunately, he had opened with, “Hey, you there. I order you to become my woman!”

It was an *atrocious* attempt at a pickup line; it was almost bad enough to make you doubt his sanity.

Luceris had turned him down—time and time again. And then, having lost his patience with it all, Zweit had divided the orphanage up into four locations under the pretense of “practicing for his duties as the next duke.”

Officially, his reasoning was that “the orphanage was becoming a blight on

the local scenery.” But it was clear that his real aim was to isolate Luceris. In fact, he’d declared as such right to her face—which had, of course, only served to make her hate him all the more. As time passed, she took every opportunity to show the cold shoulder to Zweit and his crude attempts at wooing her.

This had only made Zweit even more obstinate; it had stoked his temper and made him even less willing to yield.

And so the war of words between the two continued to escalate—leading to their current impasse.

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“Don’t you understand that I *hate* you?! You’re a cowardly, despicable man, a brute who tries to take advantage of people’s weaknesses. Why on earth would you expect me to open my heart to you? You’re the worst kind of scum!”

“Hmph. Run your mouth if you want—while you can. Once I get approval for a new business, you won’t be able to stay here anyway. And just like that, you’ll end up crawling back to me in tears. Oh—it’s what’s best for the brats, too, of *course*...”

Luceris might have been kindhearted, but Zweit’s behavior had gone entirely too far. Such scathing words might have been surprising from the mouth of a priest, but he had really made her mad.

She shot him a contemptuous glare. “You truly are despicable. If you really *are* going to be the next duke, then I worry for the people. Though I hope it’ll be your younger brother, Croesus...”

“You bitch... Are you seriously telling me you prefer that twisted shut-in over *me*?”

“He’s a far better man than you. You’re nothing but a thoughtless coward who lords his power over others!”

This seemed a little too heated to call a lovers’ spat. But whatever you called it, it was clear that things were crossing a line. If the situation escalated much further, it could end in more than just injuries.

For example, if Zweit decided to cut down Luceris where she stood, it would

mean making an enemy out of the entire Faith of the Four Gods. And that, in turn, would lead to major diplomatic problems between the Magic Kingdom of Solistia and more ardently religious countries. He wouldn't be able to claim protection from the royals, and he would be risking his status as heir. But none of that had occurred to him.

He was operating on the logic of a mere bully, and he had far too much pride for his own good. This all made him a particularly unpleasant young man.

*

"Hmm. So to sum it up, you're saying this guy's already been rejected, but he doesn't *care* what she says and just keeps trying to go after her ass? Or—no, maybe 'breasts' would be the better term, in her case. Anyway, he's refusing to take no for an answer and keeps coming around to bother her, right?"

"Yup. What a kid!"

"Even the kids are calling him a kid, huh? I guess *nobody's* a fan of this guy."

"I meeeean...he keeps trying to get her attention, but I don't think he's got a shot, right?"

"Yeah. Especially if he's playing dirty like that. I don't think he's got any chance at being more than friends now—if that. Setting aside his stupid ideas, his first love's ended up pretty much completely bankrupt because of what he's done; I can't see any way for him to fix *that* relationship. Seriously, how'd things even get to this point...?"

Zweit and Luceris turned around to see the kids from the orphanage, caught up in an energetic chat with a shabby-looking mage in a gray robe. What was more, the group had been spectating their little feud with calm detachment, providing commentary and analysis as they went.

Luceris's face went red in an instant. She would've loved nothing more than to find a hole nearby and crawl into it.

Zelos turned to Zweit. "So the first thing you ever said to her was, 'I order you to become my woman,' eh? I don't know what made you think *that* was a good pickup line. Do you have a lot of confidence, or are you just an idiot? Or is it both?"

He continued to criticize the young noble. “How about starting off by, I don’t know, pretending to bump into her by coincidence and then striking up a conversation from there? Something like, ‘Thanks for helping us out, Sister. Us nobles are bound to protect the people, and your charity—your healing—means so much to them, I’m sure. I really appreciate it.’”

“Ooh, that sounds cool!”

“First impressions are important, you know? Especially if it’s someone you’ve never met before. Say something like that, and you could’ve given off the impression of a kind, noble-hearted future duke who really does care for his people...”

“So he failed right away?”

“Laaaaaame!”

“Soooo not cool. Who’d want to end up like *him*?!”

Alongside Zelos were the children. They’d mostly just been watching the fray, but now they jumped in to throw their own verbal barbs at Zweit.

“Sounds like you screwed up *after* that too. All because you wanted more opportunities to meet her, you divided up the orphanage and assigned her to some dangerous-looking place in the old town, right? It’s completely obvious that you want to make her rely on you. You just can’t be honest, can you?”

“Yeah! Sister was saying that too!”

“I bet she was. Even if it’s not set in stone yet, he *is* expected to be the next duke, so he really should give a little more thought to how he comes across in public. Look, kid, if rumor about all this gets out, you could end up a laughingstock among the people. If you’re gonna be the next duke, then surely you don’t want that. It’d be a pretty stupid mistake, you know?”

“Everyone’s gonna hate you~!”

“Goodbye to your love!” crowed the children. “Goodbye to being a duke!”

“It’s *over* for him, riiiiight~?”

The kids were just running their mouths at the young noble—but as far as his reputation was concerned, they weren’t wrong. And that was why Zweit’s

shoulders had begun to shake as he struggled to contain his frustration. Whether he'd always had at least *some* degree of self-awareness, or whether he was only beginning to gain some now, it wasn't clear—but whatever the case, he was realizing anew that he'd completely failed to woo Luceris. That he'd reached a point from which there was no coming back.

Hearing it said to him so directly, however, was only making him all the more furious...

"Faaaaailure! Failure! Faily faily faaaaaailure!" The kids were chanting at him as a group now.

"The fact that you still haven't given up on her means you must be a pretty determined kind of guy, right? I get it. But at this point, you've screwed up so badly that there's nothing you can do to help it. Every time you meet her, you're only making her hate you more; you'd look a lot more dignified at this point if you just reflected on your immaturity and gave up, y'know? Sucks to be you, I guess!"

"No love, no job—your life is oooooover!"

"All right, come on; it's not like he's killed himself, so that last part's a bit rude. I guess he *will* have to live with the shame of it, though..."

The kids were merciless—and so was Zelos, in his own way.

"If you regret what you've done, then bow down to her and apologize; you might be able to improve her opinion of you, at least a bit. Though with how far you've gone, I guess it might even be too late for *that*. You probably *are* already past the point where you can fix things, so...yeah, your best bet's probably just to bow out and try to keep some shred of dignity. You should still be able to salvage your reputation enough to become duke, at least."

"You mean he should use his failure at love to encourage him to do better at work?"

"He'll be happier that way!"

"Bad behavior! No going back! Haunting you forever! Think about your reputation!"

“Does he want to be an adult? Or a kid? I can’t tell!”

The kids were just talking about it to pass the time. But to Zweit, it was just about a matter of life or death.

After all, they were arguing with raised voices on a public street. There were going to be witnesses.

What was more, he was a noble, and he cared about how he appeared in society; it was only natural to want to maintain his dignity. Though in a sense, it was already too late for that—he’d been making blatant threats without a lick of shame or honor.

All in all, Zweit’s behavior had him on a one-way path to ruin. Should rumors spread, his position as future duke could easily be handed over to his younger brother instead.

“You’ve got to be responsible for your own actions. It’s because you’ve failed to do that and just followed your emotions that you’ve ended up in the mess you’re in now. It seems to me like both your love life *and* your future as duke are on the brink, right?”

“Is this what they call ‘pathetic’? Or is it ‘de-spi-ca-ble’?”

“More importantly, I wanna eat some skewers. Can we eat yet?”

“Yeah, let’s eat, Pops! My tummy’s all empty!”

“The duke’s kid can die or whatever. I don’t care. Just gimme the meat!”

It seemed like the children had lost interest. Images of delectable meat skewers had pushed the duke’s son out of their minds.

*

Meanwhile, the guards escorting Zweit could do nothing but stand back and watch the argument. They were lost for words.

From an outsider’s perspective, the conversation between the middle-aged man and the orphans could pass as small talk. But for those in question, it was a huge issue.

While it might not have been that much of a problem for Luceris—the victim

in all this—it was *very much* a big problem for Zweit. On top of the risk to his future prospects, he was being made a spectacle, a target of ridicule for the common people. And considering how many spectators had seen his actions on previous days, it was safe to assume that rumors were floating around. One more wrong move and he could be punished as a criminal.

“U-Um...” The young woman spoke up.

“What is it, Sister?”

“Sorry if I sound rude for asking, but...” She paused. “Who would you happen to be?”

“Just a regular citizen who happened to get pestered by these kids here. They came up to me out of nowhere going, ‘Pops, gimme meat!’”

Luceris shot a glare toward the children, who now huddled together behind Zelos to use him as a shield.

They’d only been trying to make a living—though they’d been unexpectedly brazen in going about it.

The sister hesitated for a moment before responding. “I really do apologize for them. We haven’t been getting enough funding lately, so we’ve been struggling to make ends meet...”

“Ah... Don’t tell me, is that *also* because of the guy over there? Did he really go *that* far?”

“He uses such cowardly methods! I’m not even sure he has human emotions! The gods will never forgive the things he’s done...”

“So he’s the kind of guy who takes whatever he wants by force, eh? I’ve heard that *some* of the nobles here don’t throw around their power and authority, but...well. He should know he’s already failed, so why does he keep abusing his power to try and court you?”

“I’m not sure he *does* understand that he’s failed. Which is a bit of a problem...”

“By the way, about those meat skewers...”

“Oh, I’m so sorry—having them do that to you when you don’t even know

them! We'll pay you back, I promise..."

"No, it's fine. Just think of it as a donation. The kids need plenty of food to grow up healthy, after all."

"Thank you so much, truly! But is it really okay?"

"Well, I kind of bought fifty of the things on a whim. I only realized afterward that there was no way I'd be able to eat them all. Aha ha ha..."

"S-So generous!"

"If you can call my bad habit of impulse buying 'generous,' then sure. I just happened to earn more money than I was expecting this morning, so I bought a whole bunch of stuff without really thinking it through. I'm just hoping I haven't crashed the value of magic stones..."

"You! You over there! You realize you've been insulting a *noble*, yes? And a blood relative of the duke, at that? Do you really expect to make a fool of me and get away with it?"

Zweit finally barged his way into their conversation, his nostrils flaring with prideful anger.

"Took you long enough. You know, I honestly didn't expect you to wait until we were done with our conversation. Maybe you've got more discipline than I thought! Oh—for comedic timing, I mean."

"Silence! I don't know what faction you belong to, but you have some real guts, trying to make a fool of me when you're a mere gray-robe..."

"A 'gray-robe,' huh? Hmm. Does this country rank its mages by the color of their robes or something?"

"What? Ah," Zweit replied after a moment. "So you're not from around these parts. Let me *educate* you, then. Yes, mages are ranked by the color of their robes—gray first, then black, red, and white. So a gray-robe like you is at the bottom of the pile. No better than an apprentice. Leagues apart from a red-robe like myself."

Zweit was rattling off his explanation, a smug confidence on his face. He hadn't noticed the hole in his logic.

“Uh—mind if I say something?”

“What?”

“I only just *got* to this country, you know? Sure, okay, maybe the color of a mage’s robes is used to show how strong they are *here*. But what if that doesn’t apply to me?”

Zweit fell silent.

Yes—it was only this country that ranked mages by the color of their robes. That didn’t apply to mages from abroad, and so Zweit couldn’t actually know how he compared with this man in strength. There was no way of knowing the true power of a foreign mage at a glance, unless you had a particularly high-level detection skill.

“H-Hmph. So what? I-I’m still a high-ranked mage, I’ll have you know! Do you really expect me to lose to some scruffy mongrel from who knows where?!”

“You can only look so tough when you’re blushing and stammering like that, you know? And who *knows* where you got that baseless confidence of yours from... Look, I’m not sure you want to be picking fights with people when you’ve got no idea how strong they are. It’s dangerous to look down on your opponents. And besides, forget about *me* insulting you or whatever, the rumors about you have already spread all over the place, by the sound of it. And you can only blame your own mistakes for that. You’re just trying to take out your anger on me, aren’t you?”

“S-Silence, you cretin! I’m sure you’re a failure of a mage anyway! And I will *not* let a failure defeat me! *Fireball!*”

Zweit seemed furious over the fact that Zelos had been allowed to enter the orphanage.

Driven by that fury, he had cast a spell without incantation or warning, and sent it flying toward Zelos. However...

PSSSSH.

Zelos did nothing but stretch out a lazy fist—but the moment he did, the Fireball spell fizzled, vanishing in a flash before everyone’s eyes.

“Wh-Wha—?! I-I thought you were a mage?!”

“Sure am. I’m decent in a brawl too, though. Is that a problem?”

“I see you have swords as well. Two of them. Don’t tell me...”

“Mmm hmm. I’d say swordsmanship’s my forte, if you don’t count magic. My bare fists are enough for someone like you, though. No need for my magic *or* my swords...”

Zelos possessed the Divine Brawler job skill. Your average mage posed no threat to him.

After all, Divine Brawler was the highest-ranked version of the Brawler skill; hand-to-hand combat was already the very worst matchup for mages, and Zelos had mastered it. Mages were at an inherent disadvantage if their opponent came at them directly.

“Come on. Mages really *should* have some close-quarter combat skills as a backup. Is it *that* much of a surprise?”

“Hey—you two! Buy me some time. I’ll burn this scoundrel alive!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Leave it to us, Sir Zweit!”

The two knights guarding Zweit put their hands on the pommels of their swords and tried to size up Zelos. This strange man was skilled at fighting with his bare fists, so they’d be at a disadvantage unless they drew their weapons. Not to mention, he had swords of his own—*and* he could use magic.

“Getting ready to use your swords, eh? But are you *sure* that’s a good idea?”

“S-Sure *what’s* a good idea?”

“If you *draw* those swords... Okay, be honest with me. Are you prepared to die?”

The knights froze, the shock apparent on their faces.

Cold sweat trickled down their spines. At a glance, nothing had changed—but something about their opponent was clearly different now. He was merely standing there, and yet they couldn’t see a single opening to attack from.

The knights felt as if their feet were frozen to the ground. It was almost like they could see an illusion of a huge, ferocious beast standing in front of them. They somehow *knew*, on an instinctive level, that trying to press ahead with an attack would mean throwing themselves into danger.

“What are you waiting for? GO!”

“B-But...”

“Sir Zweit... He’s too strong. I can’t even see an opening to attack from!”

“None of you have the martial arts skills—or even the creativity, honestly—to take me on. But if you’re going to attack me anyway, then I guess I can be your opponent. Come at me if you’re prepared. It’s a little disappointing that you’re all under Level 100, though...”

“Wha—?!” Three voices of shock rang out.

As if he were imitating a certain dragon-themed martial artist, Zelos stretched out his left hand and beckoned with four of his fingers, provoking the knights to come and get him.

“By the way, I can see all of your stats, you know? Your skills too. Do you get what that means?”

“Th-The Appraisal skill?! There’s no way! If he can really see all that, then...”

“That’d mean that he’s a far higher level than all of us, right...?”

“I’ve only ever heard rumors about people that strong...”

“Let’s see,” Zelos chimed in to their little discussion. “If you want to come at me, I think you’d want to be *at least* strong enough to take down a wyvern by yourself.”

What one could see with Appraisal depended on the level gap between the person using the skill and the person being appraised, as well as on what level the user had gotten their Appraise skill up to. If you were a significantly higher level than the person you were appraising, you were able to get more detailed information about them. So the fact that Zelos was saying he could see *everything* on their status screens would mean that his level was overwhelmingly higher than theirs.

“Hang on. He hasn’t actually said what any of our stats are yet. He might just be bluffing!”

“Zweit, Level 50. You specialize in fire magic, and—hmm?” *It says “brainwashed” under his status conditions. What’s that supposed to mean? Should I tell him?*

“So it *wasn’t* a bluff! Shit! I didn’t want to use this, but you leave me no choice. *Flames of purgatory, surge as dragons to ruin my foe. O wicked destroyers, ancestors from the underworld...*”

“W-Wait! Sir Zweit! That incantation is...”

“Using a spell like that in the old town could start a fire! Are you *trying* to burn this whole place to the ground?!”

“Nga ha ha ha! Let’s see if you can stay so composed *this* time, old man! Take this—*Dragonfernal Destruction!*”

Countless dragons of bright-red flame formed out of thin air and began to swarm toward Zelos. But his only reaction was a sigh.

“I’ve seen that one already. *Phantom Rush.*” *Jeez, give a bit of thought to when and where you’re using your magic, dammit! Argh, I give up on teaching this kid!*

Zelos darted about in a flash, eliminating the flaming dragons with rapid kicks and punches. It looked almost as if he had split into countless versions of himself.

It was possible, technically, to minimize the damage from wide-area attack magic like this if you were able to smash it into pieces before the physical phenomenon finished forming and activating. That was what Zelos had just done—leaving everyone watching dumbfounded by such an absurd method of countering the attack.

“Aaaaand there we go. That’s the last of them.”

Zelos dispersed the last of the flaming dragons with a roundhouse kick—then casually scratched at his messy hair, as if what he’d just done was mere child’s play. It was a gesture that spoke for itself: “I told you so. That was nothing.”

Zweit had cast a huge spell, one that could burn down an entire city if used by a talented mage. But Zelos had swatted it away with nothing but his hands and feet, all before any of the onlookers could suffer so much as a scratch.

“I feel like that was *much* stronger when Creston cast it. Eh, I guess that’s the best a Level 50 can do. And I bet you’re not able to cast it a second time, right? You would’ve been better off using a *regular* area spell if it was going to drain you that much, you know.”

“Th-This can’t be happening! That was my most powerful spell! And you stopped it without breaking a sweat...”

After firing off a spell like that, Zweit was almost out of mana.

What was more, the young man was yet to understand what Zelos had just said. But his knights had—and the realization had their faces going pale.

“Hey. Did he just...”

“Yeah. He—he just said the former duke’s name, didn’t he...?”

“Oh. Did I not tell you? I’m staying at Creston’s place at the moment. So the two of us know each other, of course...”



“You *didn’t* tell us, no!!!” Zweit and his knights cried out as one.

“Ah. Yeah. Now that I think back, I guess I didn’t, huh?”

It was beginning to dawn on them: Zelos was an acquaintance of the retired former duke. It was the worst possible scenario for Zweit.

What was more, Zelos’s laid-back attitude was irritating the young man. But even if he’d wanted to hit him, he was out of mana, unable to even move.

“Y-You bastard. Don’t tell me you’re going to tell—”

“You’ve got to pay for your mistake, okay? So yes, I’ll be making sure to report this. It’s what a proper adult would do. You agree, don’t you?”

“Please! No! He’ll kill me!”

“Hmph. Begging now, are we? But... I refuse! Remind me—what did you do to this girl here? To a priestess? You’ve been up to some pretty horrible tactics, haven’t you? And not only do you not show any signs of remorse—you just tried to use area magic inside the city. *Fire* area magic, at that! If you’d started a fire here, with all these houses crammed together, it would’ve been a catastrophe. No, you deserve to get a harsh punishment for this. A harsh, thought-out punishment... Okay?”

“I’m begging you! I’ll do whatever you want! Just—just spare me that!”

“Rejected. Someone who throws around that sort of power like it’s nothing, just because they got mad, is never going to reflect unless they’re given a proper punishment. I want you to see it as your punishment for not thinking about what magic to use, and for acting dangerously. You really ought to stop being so rash—especially if you’re meant to be the duke’s heir, eh?”

Zelos had shot down Zweit’s pleas for mercy.

Well, it should be a good lesson for him. Having a mage act out like that in a downtown area can only ever end in tragedy, after all.

Zelos took out a cigarette from his breast pocket and lit it.

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“Wow. You managed to negate a spell with just your bare hands! But

something feels off; I'm not quite sure what, but it's *something*. All I can feel is some vague sense of unease..."

Luceris was left feeling somehow wary of the mage in front of her, who'd just pulled off what seemed like an impossible feat.

There was his appearance, of course—he was a particularly slovenly, shady-looking kind of man. But that wasn't the problem; it was that Luceris couldn't feel any mana emanating out of him at all.

Every person let out some amount of mana. It served as their presence, in a way—and people with good perception were able to pick up on that.

It was an ability shared by all those who used magic—albeit to a different degree depending on the individual—and if you were particularly adept, you'd gain a proper skill for it. Luceris, of course, possessed such a skill—Detect Mana, specifically. And now, finally, she realized that this skill wasn't reacting at all to the man.

Usually that would mean that he was considerably weaker than she. Yet the feeling she got from actually looking at the man before her was that he was somehow *different* from other people—an exception to the rule.

"Oh? Detect Mana, is it? You won't be able to sense my mana with that. The field of mana around me is too big for it to work properly."

"Huh?! Wh-What are you..."

"I'm saying that you aren't the only one who can use Detect Mana. Well, it activates automatically, so sometimes it just goes off by itself and starts telling me things I don't care about. That can be a bit of a pain."

It wasn't just that you'd struggle to sense the mana from someone much *weaker* than you; the skill could also fail for the opposite reason. Here, specifically, it was an optical illusion of sorts, caused by the fact that Luceris was inside Zelos's mana field. It was something that could occur more easily when your skill level was lower, and it worked something like this: if you were fully inside the mana field of someone with a great amount of mana, you wouldn't be able to detect it properly, unless you intentionally limited or cut off your own emanation of mana to help you feel the other person's mana on your skin.

“I-I’m sorry! Using a skill to analyze someone without their permission is against the law, I know, and yet I—”

“No, no, don’t worry about it! It happens all the time between mages. Plus, we’re even—I haven’t been able to stop myself from checking you out either. Since earlier...”

Luceris was eighteen years old—a woman of marriageable age. She wore the unfashionable garb of a priestess, yet even through that, she was clearly well-endowed, her two sizable mounds making their presence known to the world. They’d been catching Zelos’s eye for a while now—and while he was aware it was rude, he couldn’t stop his eyes from drifting toward her chest. He was, after all, a *boob man*.

For the record, his scouter told him the girl was a D cup.

“Eep!”

“You’ve got some nice stuff there. I haven’t been around any women for a while, so as much as I know it’s rude, my eyes keep...you know. Sorry, though. Seriously.”

“Pops is a *perv*!” The four kids taunted him in unison.

Feeling a powerful gaze on her chest, Luceris hurried to cover herself with her arms. But if anything, it only served to emphasize the body under those white robes all the more. The contrast between that body and her chaste reaction somehow made it even *more* erotic.

“Now, if they’re *too* big, then even for *me* that’s a turn-off, but—*ahem*! Uh, sorry.”

He liked them big, but not big enough to win a Guinness World Record or anything. Even he had his preferences.

“I-I thought you were a gentleman...”

“I’m like every other middle-aged guy, really. It comes naturally. I’m a fan of dirty jokes too. Still, I think I’m probably not as bad as the average man...”

Tears of embarrassment welled in Luceris’s eyes, stirring a sadistic desire inside Zelos.

But he stifled his lust and put on a straight face.

“You’re obscene! Shameless! Dirty! I can’t believe you!”

“You’d do well to assume every guy’s a perv. Including *them*, of course; I’m sure of it. Absolutely certain!”

Zelos directed those last words toward Zweit—who was totally exhausted from mana depletion—and his two knights. All three men rushed to avert their eyes. It looked like Zelos had been right on the mark.

“D-Don’t try and drag me into this all of a sudden!”

“Is that really how you were looking at me?! You pervert! I *despise* you!”

“N-No! I wasn’t...”

“Oh? Can you *really* say that? About such a busty, beautiful woman? Are you sure you never found yourself getting a little horny around her, my boy?”

“Y-Y-You shut up! Silence!”

Zweit was desperate to keep up appearances. But Zelos was intent on teasing him.

Zelos had decided that the young man would be a rather fun toy to play with. And it had his knights struggling to hold back their laughter.

“B-Beautiful? *Me*? I’m just normal! You’re exaggerating...”

“Nope. I’m pretty sure *any* guy’d find it hard to take their eyes off a prim and proper beauty like you.”

“S-Surely not...”

“To men, going after beautiful women’s like making a journey into the unknown. There’s no way of knowing how it’ll end up—but even then, there’s no end to the line of adventurers willing to make that journey. You’d do well to recognize it: you’re leagues ahead of the average woman. And denying it *too* much can come off as sarcasm, you know? Anyway, just ask our friend over there—I’m sure he’d agree with me. Particularly when it comes to your breasts!”

“I *told* you, stop pulling me into this! How am I even meant to respond?!”

Zelos was taking full advantage of the opportunity to tease Zweit.

Luceris, meanwhile, was hanging her head, her face beet-red.

Her long, platinum-blond hair was tied into a braid that stretched down to the middle of her back, and her proportions were impressive enough to put even a first-rate model to shame. Her face, which still had a sense of innocence to it, was also incredibly cute—and when it showed her determined resolve, it would be no exaggeration to say that she looked like the very picture of a saintess.

But Luceris herself, having been born and raised as an orphan, was unaware of her own appeal.

And now, she was murmuring quietly to herself. “A beauty? *Me?* Surely not! But...”

“By the way, about those meat skewers—do you want me to carry them anywhere in particular?”

“O-Oh! Right! Um... To the kitchen, please.”

Luceris, embarrassed by Zelos’s compliments to the point of blushing, responded in a fluster.

Back when she’d been training as a priestess, the male priests had constantly struggled to ward off their worldly desires in her presence—not that Luceris had ever realized. There were no ifs or buts about it; she was a natural charmer. Albeit without any clue that she was...

“Which way to the kitchen? It’s my first time going into a church like this, after all.”

“S-Sure! Um... This way!”

“Are you okay? You seem kind of out of it.”

“It’s n-n-nothing! I’m fine!”

“You’re stumbling over your words.”

Luceris guided Zelos inside the orphanage, continuing to act oddly.

Trailing behind them were the children, chanting, “Eat-meat! Eat-meat!”

That left Zweit behind outside, dumbfounded. Eventually, however, he recalled the gravity of the situation he was in—and collapsed on the spot, exhausted, his head slumping. He was going to have to pay for his crimes.

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After that, Zelos had dinner at the orphanage, then took a carefree stroll back to the castle.

At this point, by the way, he had forgotten all about a certain fact: the “brainwashed” condition he’d seen on Zweit’s status screen.

It would still be a while longer until Zweit himself learned the truth.

Chapter 9: The Old Guy Cultivates a Field at the Orphanage

Three men sat face-to-face at the duke's official residence.

The first was an elderly man, who'd given up his status as head of the family to retire—Creston. The second man was much younger, and the eldest son of the current duke—Zweit. The last was a stern-looking middle-aged man in a white robe. The current duke himself—Delthasis.

*

"So. You started a fight with this man, not knowing he was Father's guest; you used, of all things, the spell that is our family heirloom; and you lost pathetically. Do I have that right?"

Heirloom spells were the kind of things that a mage should never show on a whim. They were secrets passed down through family lines.

Commonly referred to as original spells, they were secret techniques that represented the culmination of a family's research. So it was a problem that Zweit had revealed his family's so readily—and even more so that the spell had been countered as if it were nothing.

"Y-Yes. But that man's strength was something unnatural, I—"

"Spare me the excuses. Not only did you use it within our territory, with no thought for the casualties it might cause, but it was all because some *girl* you fell for looked like she was getting along with another man? Did you *think* about what sort of shame would come to our family if that sort of pathetic rumor were to get around?!"

"He *was* up against Zelos, to be fair to the boy. I used the same spell against him myself, and yet he countered it in a mere instant with a heirloom spell of his own."

"E-Even a mage as powerful as *you*, Grandfather?! No way..."

“Yes—I find it hard to believe myself. Who exactly *is* that man?”

“He hasn’t told us everything, but he saved both Celestina’s life and my own. I’ve hired him as her private tutor, in fact.”

“Wh-What?”

“Him? As *her* teacher?! Are you seriously having her learn from a monster like that? Is this some kind of joke?!”

And so Creston recounted the story of his first meeting with Zelos.

As they listened, Delthasis’s and Zweit’s facial expressions started to change. The former’s became that of a man considering what could be a complex political issue; the latter’s became an expression of fear, as he learned his place in the world. Two rather different reactions.

“I’d very much like to hire him—get him working for the country in some sort of high position.”

“We wouldn’t be able to. He’s told me himself that he finds politics and the like to be a bother. And I know not what he could do if we try to clumsily force it upon him. Well, he’s not the type who would just attack us out of the blue, at least.”

“Won’t it be dangerous to let him run loose, though? To have a man of such talent *not* serving the country seems...”

“I find it rather befitting of a mage, myself! Why, I imagine he’d be willing to pick a fight with the country itself if it aided his research.”

“I’d rather not make an enemy of him. Who knows how many heirloom spells he’s even got.”

“Based on what I’ve heard from Tina, he has several that could bring entire countries to ruin. Though it seems that they were more of a research project for him; he appears uninterested in actually using them.”

“That still makes him a major threat, Father. Is there really no way for us to put him on a leash...?”

From a political standpoint, Zelos was the equivalent of someone walking around carrying nuclear weapons for fun. And Delthasis wasn’t such a laid-back

man as to let a mage like that wander around doing as they pleased.

“Don’t push your luck, Delthasis. Or do you *want* to destroy this country? Just treat the man casually—like Tina is doing—and we’ll be fine.”

“A mage like that would be able to make some real contributions to the country’s magic research, though. So why do you insist on stopping me?”

“Just you *try* and drag a mage worn out by fighting into the middle of a power struggle. He’d annihilate the lot of you, right from the get-go, and then disappear from the country entirely, I believe. So no. I don’t want to see any needless deaths.”

“And I suppose he *is* your savior, Father. Perhaps we *can’t* force him into it after all.”

“Indeed. And look at it this way: he seems willing to teach anything *except* his original spells. Tina’s even become his official apprentice. She’s studying her magic with such passion now...”

“I thought the girl couldn’t even *use* magic?”

“She’s already learned how. Thanks to Zelos, that is. As you’d expect of a Great Sage...”

“Wh-What?” Zweit and Delthasis responded, father and son in unison.

They were surprised, in part, at the fact that Celestina had learned to use magic. But more than that, they were shocked to hear the term “Great Sage” coming out of Creston’s mouth. After all, it was thought that there had been only a few Great Sages even during the time of the Dark God War, leveraging their wisdom to support the heroes along their journey.

But when the Dark God was sealed away, all of them perished—fading away into the sands of time, along with their knowledge.

Since then, not a single person had been seen with the job of Great Sage. Many now said that the very existence of the job was nothing but a myth.

“F-Father?!” Delthasis paused to collect himself. “Is that really true?”

“Very much so. His level already seems to be above 1,000. I daresay he would be stronger than some heroes.”

“You’re kidding. Did I seriously pick a fight with a monster like that...?”

“Not a word of this to anyone. Including His Majesty...”

“Of course!” Zweit and Delthasis responded together again.

To be a Sage-class mage meant sitting among the highest echelons of VIPs. It held such prestige that all sorts of mages would seek out knowledge in their mission to become one.

And a *Great Sage* was someone who far outstripped even those Sages; to become one was almost like becoming a god. Yet here sat a young man who had been foolish enough to pick a fight with that sort of awe-inspiring individual.

“If things had gone worse, he could’ve wiped our whole family lineage off the face of the earth.”

“Whoa. I had no idea I went after such a monster of an opponent...”

“He seems to just want a quiet life, so I imagine we will be fine as long as we grant him some land. I’ve promised him as such already.”

“Is *that* all he wants? Get it done, then. Right away.”

“Indeed. I intend to grant him part of the forest around my secondary residence, as well as the orphanage.”

“G-Grandfather?! Why the orphanage...?”

The old man’s words rang alarm bells for Zweit, who remained head-over-heels for Luceris.

“Apparently he’s come up with some magic suited to everyday work; he even wants to teach it to the children from the orphanage. ‘Farming magic,’ I think he called it.”

“What even *is* that? Isn’t magic usually about offense? Or providing support on the battlefield?”

“He said he was going to show Celestina new ways of using magic! Ah, what a splendid teacher...”

“I’d love to let those fools in the Order of Mages hear that. So, Father—do

you think the girl will be able to develop any talent?”

“I do. In fact, she’s already made remarkable progress in just a few days. It seems I was right; the likes of the academy truly *were* unable to cultivate her talent.”

“They do prioritize *natural* talent there, yes. You don’t last long there without the ability to activate magic.”

“Exactly—which is why the textbook Zelos improved is so important. I took a look through and learned some of the formulas myself; they’re rather user-friendly, you know?”

“It’s *that* good, is it? I’d very much like to spread it throughout the country to educate our mages, then. Do we have his permission?”

“I’ve already gotten it. And with that, we can say goodbye to some of the good-for-nothings among the ranks of the mages. It’s far superior to the previous textbook they made, after all.”

Both the old man and the current duke had graduated from the Istol Academy of Magic. And while both men had been at the top of their years at the school, they had their concerns about the current state of the place.

“Not that it’s a significant matter, but Delthasis—aren’t you rather cold toward the girl?”

“I can’t exactly dote on her in front of my two wives, you know. Her mother was so much more attractive than the two of them, after all...” Delthasis let out a sigh.

“A jealous woman is something to be feared, I know. Mightn’t you get stabbed some day or another? You really should stop being so unfaithful.”

“Oh, I’ve been stabbed plenty of times already. It’s just not enough to do me in, that’s all.”

“Too late, was I? You never change... Truly, I’m amazed you’ve made it this long without dying.”

Celestina was treated poorly within the ducal family. Despite that being the case, her father, at least, seemed to have some affection for her—though he

would never be able to show it openly.

The duke had an impressive history of illicit affairs with women.

“Well, we can work on improving things with the academy and the factions over time. The problem for now is...”

“Yes. Zweit.” Creston was in agreement with his son.

“Urgh,” Zweit groaned. “I was hoping you’d forgotten...”

“How *could* we forget! You tried to sound all high and mighty, saying you wanted to ‘get experience working as the future duke, and improve yourself, and broaden your horizons’—and now we find out it was all just you abusing your authority to get your hands on a single girl. It’s outrageous! Do you have no shame?!”

“B-But Father! Aren’t you always surrounded by mistresses yourself? Why the hell are *you* blaming *me* for this?!”

“*I* am able to balance my work with my play. And I will have you know, I have never *once* relied on my authority to get a woman!”

Delthasis was a real player; he excelled at courting women.

However, he kept his work and his private life completely separate—to the extent that when he wanted a woman, he tended to go incognito, hiding his identity. He also made sure that women he’d been with were well looked after, showing his thoughtfulness by providing financial assistance to make sure they wouldn’t be left in poverty.

Incidentally, he ran a trading business alongside his work as the duke. He hadn’t once laid his hands on tax money for personal reasons. He was a capable man—in more ways than one.

“It’s because I’ve got a father like you that I’m in a hurry, you know?! I wouldn’t put it past you to try and lay your hands on her yourself if you get the chance!”

“Are you saying that your behavior is *my* fault? You need to realize just how small a man you are. Getting good women to fall for him is how a man proves his worth; have I not taught you that? You can use all the cheap tricks you want

to create the *illusion* of excellence, but a good woman will see right through that. Or do you not understand that either, you fool?!”

“I’ll be going back to the academy before long, and you *know* it! Meaning that I won’t be here—and that my scumbag of a father might set his sights on her. I do *not* want that shit to happen!”

“If that *were* to happen, it would merely prove that you have no appeal as a man. She wouldn’t be giving another man the time of day if you had really managed to charm her. And even if I *did* take her from you—the kind of woman who would betray you at the drop of a hat is hardly someone worth caring about, is she?”

“You’ve said it now, you shithead!”

“I did indeed—and so what? At the end of the day, you’ve done nothing but abuse your authority, and now the girl loathes you for it. It’s about time you give up. Or do you intend on disgracing your name further, you coward?”

Zweit was at a disadvantage here. His father, after all, was a playboy with all the experience in the world.

In truth, Delthasis had never once stolen another man’s woman. Or at least, if he had, she had generally been a widow, or someone with issues that he could use to justify it, and he had been nothing but sincere and gentlemanly toward them.

He was clearly cut from a different cloth.

Creston sat to the side, watching the pair bicker. “As someone who’s always been devoted to his wife, I’m not quite sure I understand all the fuss. What *is* it that makes you two go so far, I wonder?”

The old man was more one for pure, devoted love; he wasn’t the type to have relations with any woman apart from his wife, who by this point had passed away.

He had, perhaps, been with a prostitute a few times back when he was young—but even those had only been the whims of an odd day or two. It wasn’t as if he’d been a regular at any brothels.

It was with that relatively pure history behind him that Creston tilted his head to the side, rather puzzled by the war of insults between his son and grandson. What *was* clear to him, however, was that things had gotten out of hand. He let out a sigh.

And so the fierce war of words continued, father pit against son in the living room of the duke's mansion.

It was a conversation that would end up being resolved not with words, but with fists.

Right around that time, Zelos and Celestina arrived at the orphanage, flanked by two knights who'd been sent to guard them.

Luceris tentatively greeted the visitors. "Um... Zelos? What brings you here today?"

"I was hoping to do a bit of an experiment with my magic. This place has a lot of space out back—probably because it was built as a church, I guess. So I thought it might be nice to start a field there and get the kids to look after it."

"A field? I actually thought about doing that once before, but it's all just hard earth and little stones. It'd be too difficult for the children to manage."

"That's where the magic experiment I was mentioning comes in. If you practice your magic properly, you can put it to use for all sorts of things. There's a lot more to magic than just fighting, you know!"

Luceris tilted her head, confused. The church taught that non-holy magic was nothing but an evil pursuit, something used to bring harm to others. The priests believed that their holy spells worked because they asked the gods for miracles—being given a scroll for a holy spell indicated that your rank as a priest had increased. Needless to say, they didn't have a particularly fond view of mages.

But Zelos was ready to drop a bombshell.

"There's no big difference between the healing magic that priests use and the attack magic that mages use, you know? It really just comes down to what you *do* with your magic. *That's* what's important."

“Huh? We use *holy* magic! I was taught that it only works because the gods grant miracles for us!”

“Mmm...not quite. If I’m remembering correctly, you learn your spells from scrolls, right? Well, they pretty much work like an old-fashioned version of mages’ spell books. Which means that holy spells fall under the same banner as any of the spells that mages use.”

“Are you saying that priests are just a type of mage?”

“That’s right. If your average mage specializes in offense, then priests are more your rear support, specializing in defense. Not that it really matters at the end of the day, I suppose.”

Even if all this *were* true, the priesthood would have seen it as unforgivable blasphemy.

“I-I can’t believe it...”

“I can use every type of healing spell myself, you know? And I can cure poisons and purify the undead. Well, mine’s classified as light magic, though.”

“Wow... I don’t think even the highest ranked priests would be able to do all of that. But that doesn’t just mean I can just accept it...”

“My healing spells work by stimulating the cells in a person’s body. And they’re focused on efficiency, so they don’t even use that much mana. You know, once you’re able to improve basic spells, it’s not actually that much harder to just make your own.”

“Do you mean you have improved versions of healing spells too, Master?!”

A mage’s light magic and a priest’s holy magic were essentially one and the same—they belonged to the same school of magic. The problem was that this school had been split into attack spells and healing spells. One side leveraged its power for destruction, while the other interpreted its power as miracles from the gods.

By all rights, such a split should have never occurred. The Dark God War, however, had brought with it great upheaval, causing all sorts of literature to disappear. And that had had an effect on magic as well: very little remained of

magical knowledge from before the war, just odds and ends scattered throughout the lands.

However many different effects you could create with magic letters, it was all still magic at the end of the day. But this world's culture and common knowledge surrounding magic were the awkward result of a slow rebuilding process that had taken many years. The misunderstandings that had sprouted wouldn't be easy to correct right away.

As things stood, a large portion of light magic's uses had become conflated with religion and become "holy magic," and the remaining bits and pieces had gone through modern-day research and turned into a form of attack magic.

"I don't really want to make any waves in society, mind you. It'd be a pain to have the Inquisition after me or something."

"Master...if you're not careful, the world could end up in chaos over this!"

"Well, you know what they say—ignorance is bliss. If everyone's happy with how things are, then there's no real problem. Mages are all bundles of curiosity, though. I guarantee you, if one of them gets a whiff of the truth, they'll get straight onto researching it. Aha ha ha..."

"This is no laughing matter! Priests are all mages? Our spells *aren't* miracles from the gods? What am I meant to do with myself now?"

"Do you really need to worry about it that much? The truth isn't actually all that important here. Just knowing how things work won't be enough to change anything; if you *wanted* to change society, you'd need to have someone actually go out and do something about it. Which won't be me, by the way."

Depending on how things played out, Zelos's little bombshell could reshape the world. Particularly devout countries would see this as a matter of life or death; they might feel as if they had lost their sense of superiority. It was ultimately a matter of time, of course—the truth would come out sooner or later—but *when* exactly that truth came out could have a significant effect on the scale of the resulting chaos. After all, there were some unscrupulous individuals among the ranks of the priests, and no shortage of people who'd built up feelings of resentment over the years.

“Anyway, we’re getting sidetracked. Let’s get going and make a field! You know the saying: ‘He who does not work shall not eat.’”

“‘Sidetracked’?! We were talking about something pretty important just now! Theocracies could lose their entire identity, Master...”

“Anyone who expects the gods to do everything for them is sorely mistaken. They’re essentially just spectators; they don’t actually *do* much of anything. Sure, you might see something that *looks* like a miracle, but chances are it’s just some kind of rare phenomenon. Even if it seems unlikely, anything that’s possible’s going to happen somewhere, sooner or later. But people misunderstand and start calling things ‘miracles’ and worshipping them, and it can all turn into a bit of a problem.”

“One of the priests who looked after me mentioned something similar. But...do you hate the gods, Zelos? That would be a sin. You might be punished for it.”

“I do hate them, yes. They’re lazy, and they’re careless, and because of that they just about got me killed. By the Dark God, at that. Honestly, the gods are my *enemies*.”

Silence.

The wheels in the two girls’ minds had stopped turning.

“Y-You’re joking...right?” Celestina and Luceris asked in unison.

“Hmm—who knows? It’s up to the two of you whether you want to believe me or not! ♪”

Zelos wasn’t lying. If anything, he was understating it. There hadn’t been any “just about” to it; the Dark God’s curse *had*, in fact, killed him.

And it had been this world’s gods who’d sealed the Dark God away into Zelos’s own world—or rather, into a game within that world—like they’d been dumping a bunch of industrial waste. While Zelos had ultimately been reincarnated into this new world, the fact remained that he had been unfairly killed in his old one.

The gods were indeed his enemies.

Lazily dodging the two girls' questions as they pressed for more information, Zelos headed behind the church. On arriving, he was met with an open space covered by a thick, tangled mat of weeds.

Many years ago, they had wanted to make this place a graveyard. But after concerns over the impact on the town's scenery, they'd reached an impasse, and the place had been left untouched since then. There had been countless discussions over the years about putting it to use in some way or another, but ultimately none of the options had looked particularly promising, and so the space had continued to just sit there, neglected.

Then, once the new town area had been built, the space behind the old church had been gradually forgotten. Finally, the church itself had been turned into an orphanage—bringing us to the current day.

"What're we gonna be doing today, Pops?"

"You got any presents for us?"

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"Gimme meat! I want meat!"

The kids were energetic. Perhaps *too* energetic.

"I was thinking we could start cultivating a bit of a field here. Would you be able to stay out of the way for me and just watch from the sides for a bit, please?"

"Okay."

"So you don't have any presents? Pops is a cheapskate..."

"Meeaaaat..."

"Hey, Pops! Are *you* going after Sister as well?"

They weren't just energetic; they were kind of rude as well. But kids were always going to be kids, whatever world you were in.

"Okay, then—*Gaia Control!*"

Zelos placed his hands on the ground and cast a spell. The tangled mess covering the ground began to writhe about as if it were alive; the weeds,

pebbles, and other types of earth all sorted themselves into neat piles to reveal a wide open space.

With that done, Zelos used the same spell to form some ridges in the now-clear dirt. And just like that, the empty lot had been turned into a field—fit for planting seeds or seedlings—in a matter of moments.

“Th-That’s amazing! So *this* is the sort of thing you can do. Magic that can make people happy...”

“I can hardly believe it! To think that that mess of grass and weeds could be turned into a usable field so quickly... I suppose you really *are* a great mage, Zelos.”

Even the two spectators who knew a thing or two about magic were amazed by what had just unfolded before their eyes. It was neither healing magic nor attack magic, but another type altogether—magic made specifically for reclaiming land.

“And now, to enclose the field... *Stone Wall (Weak)*.”

Short barriers rose out of the ground to surround the field Zelos had just made, protecting it from intruders.

It wouldn’t protect the field from any intruders coming from above, but it was something.

“That was amazing, Pops!”

“You’re pretty cool.”

“You trying to show off to Sister? Pops is a perv!”

“No meat? I want meat...”

Some of the kids were impressed by how Zelos had managed to make the field. Others were off in their own little world.

“You should be able to grow your own vegetables here now. And if you grow some medicinal herbs or something on the side, you might be able to get a bit of extra income too. Does that sound about right?”

“It’s wonderful. I can’t think of any other word to describe it. But you’ve done

so much for us, and I haven't even done anything to thank you..."

"I told you, right? This is just me experimenting. So you don't need to worry about it."

"The saints would say something similar, Zelos, I'm sure of it. Putting in work without any compensation... It's an admirable thing you've done for us."

"You're giving me too much credit. I'm really nothing that spectacular."

Luceris was gazing at him rather affectionately.

Zelos, for his part, had no idea—no idea that the girl had started to take a *liking* to him...

His long life as a bachelor had made him rather dense in that regard.

"You really are amazing, Master. By the way—about how much mana does this spell use?"

"About 85, I'd say. It's partially powered by the external mana from nature, but it's still more of a burden on the caster than you might expect. And the larger the area you want to use it on, the higher the mana cost gets. There's definitely some room for improvement."

"I know that powerful spells cost more mana. Given that you used it on such a large space, that actually sounds like a fairly low cost, doesn't it?"

"It sounds like even regular people should be able to work their farms more easily once you've perfected it, Zelos. In fact, it *already* looks good enough to me; is it not?"

"It's probably enough to use at a construction site or something, but if I'm going to sell it to people, I think I *should* improve it a little more first. It does use a fair bit of mana, after all—and I also want to build some restrictions into it to stop people from using it in battle. That'll be the hard part."

Convenient magic would have both its benefits and its drawbacks. It was true that it would be able to find widespread use in farming and construction, but depending on what you did with it, it could also be used on the battlefield to help erect army camps, build traps, and so on. Its versatility was exactly what made it so dangerous.

“Hmmm. But if I *were* to add some restrictions to it, the complexity would make it require more mana.” Zelos had begun to mumble now, talking more and more to himself. “That might end up limiting the number of people who could use it. Adding more restrictions would mean a longer magic formula, which would inherently increase the burden on the caster. People might end up not being able to cast it unless they had a lot of internal mana. How simple can I keep it, then? I really don’t want it to be used on the battlefield, but if someone’s got a lot of control over their own mana, then whatever restrictions I put into the formula might not even be enough. So that’s a pain. How should I deal with that...?”

Zelos’s mind went into overdrive; he became oblivious to his surroundings as he thought about ways of improving the spell.

“I don’t know much about magic, but isn’t it *always* going to depend on who’s using it? I feel like you might be overthinking things a bit...”

“Perhaps. It’s still a hangup for me, though. You see, Luceris, I don’t want the spells I make to end up being used in war. Even if that might be a hard goal to achieve...”

Even magic made for everyday convenience could be turned into something dangerous, depending on its user.

Spells made for manipulating the earth might not be the best fit for combat, but if used correctly, they’d still have uses in combat—for example, stopping an enemy in their tracks. As Luceris was saying, it would probably all come down to the user.

That was, in itself, the problem.

“Are you still not happy with the spell yet, Zelos? Personally, I think it’s already convenient enough to help a lot of people...”

“That convenience is the problem. Even if its uses are limited, it could be a real threat if you’ve got enough numbers.”

“‘Numbers’? I thought it was just a spell for moving around bits of earth? Surely it can’t be *that* much of a problem, can it?”

“Oh—is *that* what you mean, Master? I can certainly see how it might be

dangerous, then.”

“Ah. It looks like you’ve realized what I’m getting at, Celestina. Yeah—for example, what do you think would happen if a hundred mages used it against a cavalry charge? It wouldn’t be hard for them to make the land swallow up their enemies. In fact, since it’s easier to control than attack magic, it’d actually be *simple* to use it for limiting enemy movements.”

“So what you’re saying, Zelos, is that while it won’t kill anyone directly, it can stop them from moving, right? I-I wouldn’t have expected such a convenient spell to end up being used in war...”

“The fact that it’s so simple would result in a whole lot of farmers being conscripted to use it in war. I’m sure of it. And if that many people *were* to be conscripted, the country’s whole economy would collapse.”

And that was how a spell that had been made merely to cultivate fields more efficiently could backfire—potentially resulting in getting farmers dragged onto the battlefield. Its convenience meant that the powerful and influential sorts throughout the world would have an easy time turning it into a tool.

Luceris was unable to hide her amazement at Zelos’s ability to think about the future. At the same time, her heart began to throb for the man.

This, and all he’d done was raise the example of, “If a war started, this is probably how things would go.”

“Whoops! Looks like I ended up going into teacher mode. Anyway, I guess I can talk to Creston for advice about that sort of thing. It’s not like I’ll be able to reach any great answers just by thinking about it myself, and it kind of seems like a pain in the ass. I think I’ll just palm it off onto someone else.”

“It sounds like a fairly serious problem though, Master...”

“Isn’t that a bit irresponsible, Zelos? This could put innocent lives at risk, you know!”

“All I can do on my end is make it a little less convenient to use, honestly. Beyond that, I’ll just foist the troublesome bits off to the higher-ups. Being irresponsible is fine by me!”

“Anyway,” Zelos continued, “getting back to the field—what do you think we could grow here? You’ve got a pretty good amount of space, so if we can, I’d recommend growing a few types of medicinal herbs. But what do you think?”

They’d gotten off-topic, but the main reason Zelos was here was to start a field. There was no reason for him to hold a lengthy magic lesson at the orphanage. He decided to shift the discussion away from a rather heavy topic.

As a side note, he’d recently learned the Teaching skill. With explanations like the one he’d just given, he was making rapid progress toward maxing it out.

Whether the skill was influencing him or not, he wasn’t sure—but he could tell he’d gotten into a bit of a habit of launching into educational tangents.

“Huh? O-Oh, yes. We’ll grow some vegetables, of course, but it’d be nice to get some income from herbs as well. Seeds are expensive, though, and that’s not all. I’m worried about whether we’ll actually be able to get this done.”

“Hmm. Fertilizer could be a problem, but you could always collect some leaf litter from the forest and turn it into leaf mold. Food scraps can be used as fertilizer too; what about setting up a chicken coop to get yourself some eggs?”

“I wouldn’t be able to manage the field by myself, though. And I’ve got work to do as well...”

“You can get the kids to do it. If you don’t teach them the importance of hard work now, they’ll be in for quite a shock when they grow up and dive right into the deep end by joining a company or something.”

“Oh—so you’re trying to help them grow their own food, and teach them at the same time? That sounds wonderful! Just what I’d expect from you, Master.”

“It’s really nothing that amazing. I guess it kind of just irks me that they assume they’ll always be able to have people give them food for nothing. They’re going to have to become independent sooner or later!”

Zelos was somewhat narrow-minded when it came to children. There was a sense of disappointment in the air.

“You’re stingy, Pops!”

“Are you a tight-ass? Are you, Pops?”

“C’mon. Stop pestering me about it. I’m a proper adult, that’s all.”

“Meat! I wanna eat some meat!”

“This is what I mean. If you’re too soft on people, it’ll start to show in their personalities. Hard work isn’t something to be avoided—in fact, it’s something you should actively seek out. These kids are quite the pieces of work, aren’t they...”

Luceris began apologizing profusely. “Sorry! Really, I’m so sorry on their behalf! It’s all because I’m not good enough...”

The children, however, knew nothing of the adults’ struggles; they were free spirits, in the truest sense of the phrase.

Celestina spoke up. “Do you have any seeds? I did hear we’d be starting a field, so I got the people from the castle to share some with me, for what it’s worth...”

“Miss Celestina?! Th-Thank you! Really, you didn’t have to!”

“What kind of seeds have you got? I might not look it, but I’m quite the farmer myself, so I’m kind of interested.”

“Let’s see... I’ve got some seeds for bushy onions, Babylon tomatoes, dropkick daikon, and muscle popeye.”

“What kind of vegetables *are* those? Anyway, I’ve got some seeds too—mandrake seeds, specifically, as well as some for healing herbs. Just stuff I picked up in the Green Depths. I’ve got too many of them, actually, so I’ve been wondering what to do with them anyway.”

“M-Mandrake?! There’s no way that we could accept such valuable seeds!”

“I mean, I got them for free in the first place, and I’ll still have a bunch leftover. Don’t worry about it.”

The mandrake was a high-end medicinal herb that could be sold for large sums of money. It found use in the likes of traditional herbal medicines, and it was also a typical ingredient in magic potions. Yet while demand for the herb was fairly high, there was always a shortage of it.

While you could get plenty of seeds from a single seedling and propagate it

from there, it was frequently eaten by monsters. That made it rare on the market.

When you pulled one out of the ground, it'd scream in its final moments—and the sound of that scream, echoing terribly, was said to kill you in an instant.

The truth, however, was that it wouldn't kill you at all. It just made you feel incredibly guilty.

Despite all that, mandrake was abundant in the forest—enough so that it was practically a weed. If not for the monsters that ate it, it would've just about covered the entire forest. Long story short, it was the perfect plant if you wanted to get rich quick.

“All righty, then—how about we get you guys to plant the seeds? Then once they've grown, you can take care of the vegetables and herbs yourselves. The field's meant to help *you* guys out, after all, so give me a hand in taking care of it, okay?”

“Do we *have* to? It sounds like a paaaain!”

“Can't we just get more food by begging?”

“Yeah! Take it easy! Get free stuff!”

“*Meeaaaat!*”

The kids weren't exactly endearing themselves to Zelos.

He shot them a broad grin—and he kept that grin plastered across his face as he picked up a nearby rock and crushed it into dust with his bare hand.

“Ha ha ha... Mr. Zelos here might be a pretty nice guy, but he can still get angry, you know? If you want to talk back like that, then... Well, I just don't want you to waste your lives. I'll be happy as long as you learn to support yourselves, okay?”

The four kids responded as one. “Yes, my lord! Right away, Your Majesty!”

It was a remarkably quick change of attitude. They'd rapidly realized that Zelos wasn't the sort of man they wanted to make angry.

Huh. Not that it really matters, but where'd they even learn to speak like that?

“Have I been raising them wrong? Oh, goddesses, raising children truly is a trial, isn’t it...”

“No. I think these children are just the stubborn type, that’s all. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

Luceris was weeping quietly, and Celestina tried her best to soothe her.

This day would mark the start of their friendship—a relationship that would overcome the gap in their ages.

Zelos was quick to take command of the group, getting everyone to chip in and plant seeds throughout the field. But as powerful as he was, he was not omniscient—and so he had no idea that what he’d done here today would mark a major turning point in how orphanages here were run.

Influenced by Zelos, the old town orphanage would undergo a transformation. And others would follow in time, making it common to grow medicinal herbs at orphanages...

As a side note, Zweit was lying flat on the floor of the duke’s mansion around this time.

A left hook from Delthasis had hit him squarely on the jaw, knocking him right out.

One could almost imagine a gong ringing out to signal the end of the fight between father and son.

Chapter 10: The Old Guy Gets Another Student

Celestina swung her mace, smashing a mud golem from the head down.

Unconcerned by the mud that splattered out from it, she turned promptly to face her next foe, striking it with a hard blow from the side. Its core destroyed, it collapsed where it stood, forming another little pile of mud.

Mud golems moved incredibly predictably. As soon as several golems had thrust forward, Celestina pulled back, leaving a flurry of muddy arms swinging through the empty space where she'd just stood. If her opponent had been a human, this would've been the moment for her to reach out herself, grab onto them, and finish them off with a single blow. Regardless, the golems' movements were dull—whatever their numbers, they were easy to deal with as long as you kept a cool head.

But of course, if the battle stretched on long enough, you'd inevitably start to tire. And in this case, there was a caster replacing any mud golems as soon as they fell.

As Celestina glanced off to the side, she saw Zelos—her teacher—observing the situation, throwing forward more magic stones, and activating the formulas within them. Three more golems sprung to life.

Three reinforcements. It'll be about twenty seconds until they join the fight. I'll beat three more before they make it here!

Celestina set her sights on a nearby golem. She'd already become adept at responding to their movements with a level head.

Though she'd never had that much internal mana, she was bright enough to have earned herself excellent grades at the Istol Academy of Magic. And while she hadn't been able to take part in combat lessons, watching from the sidelines had made her quite good at assessing situations and analyzing how to respond.

The school's combat lessons really only consisted of releasing a bunch of

captured goblins onto the training grounds, where the students could then fire off attack spells toward them in a one-sided fashion. Still, any students who left themselves open to attack could be injured, and some suffered bone fractures or the like. Celestina had watched over the lessons with a keen eye, observing how other students handled these sorts of situations and then running simulations in her mind to consider what she, herself, would do in their shoes.

The main reasons the students got injured, she had come to realize, were a lack of ability to understand the situation and respond appropriately—and an overestimation of one’s fellow students. Many students were lulled into a false sense of security on the assumption that their comrades would keep them safe.

“Mud golems move slowly, but they certainly seem to have some unusual ways of attacking, don’t they...?”

Though Celestina hadn’t let her guard down, it wasn’t as if she was entirely safe. If she left herself open, one of the golems could stretch out a leg and kick her right from below, or use the mud from one of its fellow golems to reinforce its own body; sometimes, what looked like one golem could even split into two that then attacked in unison. She’d heard that slimes, for example, could attack in similar ways—but now that she was actually seeing those attacks play out in front of her, she was finding them rather annoying to deal with.

“Lance of stone, pierce my foes! Rock Lance!”

Celestina shot out an earth spell—defeating several golems in an instant—and followed it up by brandishing her mace toward the reinforcements. But then, all of a sudden, the mud golems disappeared from her field of vision.

“Wha—?!”

For a moment, Celestina had no idea what had happened. The answer was that the golems had let their own structures collapse, simply crumbling down to the ground. But the girl’s confusion left her open to attack. The mud golems—still in the form of mere puddles of mud—crept closer toward her across the ground. And then, when they were close enough, they tangled themselves around Celestina’s legs, preventing her from moving.

At the same time, another two golems restrained her arms. They’d left her completely unable to move.

“Aaaall right. I guess that’s checkmate, then?”

“Not yet! *Power Boost!*”

“Ooh, learned to cast it without an incantation, have you? When’d you figure *that* out?”

Celestina had cast physical enhancement magic without an incantation, allowing her to shake free from the mud golems by force. She took out two of them, then brought her mace down on the last one, destroying it.

“Great job. Looks like you can win pretty easily against enemies around this level now. I’d like to try out actual combat next, but...”

“R-Really?”

“Personally, I’d say you’re ready for it. But we’d probably need to get permission from Creston first; he’s your guardian, after all. If that’s not a problem, then I think we should try it out sooner rather than later.”

At Zelos’s words, Celestina spun right around to face Creston, who’d been watching over her training.

“Hmm... Real combat, you say? I believe it might still be a tad too early for that...”

“It isn’t, Grandfather! Students in the same year as me are already defeating slimes and goblins, you know? If anything, I’m behind!”

“Still... If you’re talking about places where you can take part in real combat, then...”

Creston had a point: about the only place around here where you could reliably find real monsters to fight was the Far-Flung Green Depths.

Monsters there were stronger than normal ones; even the sort that would usually be considered small fries were powerful enough there to kill you if you let your guard down. That was just how dangerous of an area it was. It was a thicket of evil—a place abhorred even by most mercenaries. As long as you stayed around the outer edges of the forest, it wasn’t as if you’d come across anything *incredibly* strong, but even then, it was by no means safe. You could hardly blame Creston for hesitating to send his granddaughter there.

Actual combat? What if worse comes to worst?! Who knows how many goblins are lurking in that place?! And orcs! And all other sorts of monsters that could violate a young girl! On the off chance that Tina got caught by one of those brutes, then, I'd— I'd— AAAAAARGH!

It seemed like Creston had his mind on a particular *kind* of danger. Indeed, there were some goblins and orcs that captured victims from other races and turned them into mere tools for breeding. Orcs, in particular, were terribly fertile—a trait that had seen them devastate a great many towns.

Rural villages along the frontier were especially frequent targets, and orcs were a troublesome sort; they targeted anyone of any sex, as long as it allowed them to reproduce.

Of course, female orcs went after men, and male orcs went after women—but orcs of both sexes put their lives on the line to propagate in this harsh environment.

“Grandfather? What’s wrong?”

“Hwah?! N-No, it’s nothing. Nothing, I tell you!”

That old geezer. What was he imagining just now?

Zelos was no mind reader, but he had a hunch.

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“Aha! I’ve *got* it! Allow me to prepare a division of guards for Tina!”

“A whole *division*?! W-Wait— Grandfather?!”

“That’s too much, Creston! Far too much! There’s no way we could have that many people march into the forest; you know that, right? And what if some pack of huge monsters sees them as a good meal and decides to attack as a group?!”

“All I want is to keep Tina safe. The riffraff can end up as monster food for all I care!”

The old man had gone crazy. Standing there stiffly, looking as if all his joints were about to pop, he’d come right out and said that he was willing to sacrifice his own people for his granddaughter. It showed how much he loved her, but

he was also clearly going a little too far.

“That’s a pretty horrible thing to say, you know. I get loving your granddaughter, but you’re crossing a line.” *I swear, something’s not quite right with this old geezer...*

“Pah! If any of them don’t make it back, we can just send their families some money as compensation.”

“Creston, what on earth are you thinking? You’re sounding like a tyrant...”

The old noble was serious. He was so crazy for his granddaughter that he was willing to sacrifice the lives of countless men if that was what it took to protect her.

It was bad enough that Zelos couldn’t stop himself from lashing out at the man.

“If you send that many people into a forest, they won’t even be able to move properly. You’d only be making things *more* dangerous! What’s the good in making things worse?! Do you *want* to get your granddaughter killed?!”

“As long as the guards serve as Tina’s shields, all will be well. I’d go to hell with a smile on my face.”

“You can’t just sacrifice your own people like that. Is this really something a noble should be doing?!”

“Nobles are perfectly free to toy with the lives of others, if we so please. And as luck would have it, I’ve heard word lately from the Order of Knights lamenting the skill of its soldiers. This would be the perfect opportunity to flush out the chaff in the name of giving them some experience.”

Zelos was stunned. “That’s insanity, Creston. Pure evil. How low do you intend to sink?”

But when it came to his granddaughter, Creston was liable to become a wreck of a man. And when he went on a rampage like this, he couldn’t be stopped. The old man was completely lacking in common sense, and it had Zelos at his wits’ end.

“Look—if you’re going to do that, you should at *least* prepare them some

armor made from the best materials you can get. It'd improve their chances of survival, if nothing else. And if you say you can't prepare enough, then I could make something myself, as long as you give me the right materials."

"Oh? Well, then—can you make equipment suitable for a mage?"

"With the right materials, yes. I could make just about the strongest armor you can get."

"Hmm. What kind of armor would you have in mind, specifically?"

"Well, even for a mage, you'd want to have something that provides decent protection. So how about some leather armor?"

PSSSSSH...

While it was only for a moment, Zelos could swear he was able to *hear* the steam coming out of Creston's ears.

At the same time, the old man's expression was turning increasingly grim.

"Stop right there. *Leather* armor? But that would mean... That would mean *measuring* her..."

"Well...yes? It'd be dangerous if the armor didn't fit properly, after all..."

"Zelos, my good man...I think we need to have *a bit of a talk*."

"What now?!"

Creston's eyes were those of a lunatic.

He seized Zelos by the shoulders and drew right up close to the middle-aged man's face, a ghastly *something* in his eyes.

"What you are saying is that...that you would be measuring every last *nook* and *cranny* of my Tina's body, stroking her skin as you go... Is *that* your plan, you fiiiieend?!"

"What the hell makes you think *that*?! That's crazy talk!"

"I can see it now—the sight of you with your arms wrapped around my adorable Tina; your hands brushing across her, your eyes caressing her body, and then—"

“You’re overthinking it. I’ve got no interest in crossing such a dangerous line. And I’m not the kind of brute who’d try to put his hands on an underage girl!!!”

Creston doted on his granddaughter so much as to defy social norms.

And the sight of him—eyes bloodshot, nostrils flaring, a crazed look on his face—was frankly terrifying.

“I’m not saying I’d turn her down if she was older, but as things are, she’s essentially still a child, you know...”

“O-Oh...” Now Celestina joined the fray. “So you’re treating me like a *child*. I see...”

“Are you trying to say that my charming little granddaughter is *unattractive*?!”

“What do you even want me to say here?!”

Reason wasn’t getting through to the old fool. His love was excessive enough—*absurd* enough—that he’d gladly have started a war for his granddaughter’s sake.

And so passed the rest of the day—a waste of time, Zelos stuck dealing with the old man’s unreasonable outburst.

To skip to the conclusion, however, it was decided that the creation of Celestina’s armor would be left to a crafter employed by the family, with Zelos to augment it after the fact.

Even getting to that point had required a fierce battle—a rather extended *bit of a talk* with the crazed old man.

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Meanwhile, another man had been watching Celestina from the window as she trained.

That man was Celestina’s half brother, born from a different mother. His name was Zweit: the eldest son of the Duke of Solistia.

He was the assumed heir of the ducal family—but he was currently meant to be under house arrest, having used dangerous magic in the middle of town for

the sake of “courting” a single woman.

And now, he’d been sent to the family’s secondary residence to serve that house arrest, with the idea being to have his grandfather Creston whip him back into shape.

Most of the nobles in this country were what were known as magic nobles, derived from the fact that each of their families possessed magic that was passed down the generations. That magic would be taught to all members of such a family, signifying that they had been properly accepted as nobles under the family. And the magic of the Solistia ducal family was some of the country’s most powerful—to the extent that it was considered to be an example of heirloom magic.

Zweit had inherited this magic at the age of thirteen, which should have solidified his status as the de facto heir.

The magic passed down through his family was truly powerful; the family’s inclination for fire spells had seen them lauded by outsiders as the “family of purgatory,” and their achievements were impressive enough to let them wear that badge without shame.

However, that magic had recently been shattered to pieces by a single mage—as had Zweit’s pride.

What was more, the man had done so without actually using any magic whatsoever, instead countering the spell with mere martial arts. And as if to further pour salt on Zweit’s wound, the man who had done that to him had now become a frequent visitor to the orphanage run by Luceris—the woman who’d captured Zweit’s heart.

Infuriatingly, Zweit could do nothing but watch from a distance as this foreign mage had pleasant chats with Luceris and worked alongside her. He was one step away from becoming a complete stalker.

Upon reaching this castle, however, Zweit had been shocked to see the change in Celestina, the girl who’d been said to have no talent for magic whatsoever.

“That’s Celestina? I can’t believe it. What’s she been doing to get like that, in

such a short time...?”

The girl had, of course, been sticking to her daily combat practice and mana control training, all while being diligent in her classroom learning as well. But what surprised Zweit most of all was how his sister was taking the initiative in close-quarters combat.

The Celestina he knew was mostly a dark, gloomy girl. Almost like a doll, with no emotion in her words when she spoke.

Back when he'd been a child, Zweit had taken every opportunity to make the girl cry. He remembered enjoying it too.

The girl he saw now, however, showed not a trace of the one he remembered from back then. She was taking the initiative. Fighting with vigor. Being proactive.

He could see her objectively assessing the situation, predicting her opponents' movements, and striking with confidence to bring them down. Her moves still seemed a little amateurish, but she was undeniably showing remarkable growth.

And it was the Great Sage, Zelos, who was stimulating that growth.

“He can control that many golems, all at once, all by himself...? Just how much mana does he have? Shit!”

The day's training session had started not long after Zweit reached the castle. And since then, he'd seen Zelos summoning golems for more than an hour now, all the while controlling their movements with precision. Zweit was sorely aware that he'd run out of mana in an instant if he tried to do the same himself.

Zelos's mana pool was far beyond the young man's comprehension.

As far as Zweit knew, even the highest-ranking mages would've been considered proficient if they could create just two or three golems. There were some out there who could make a full six—but even then, the more golems the caster created, the heavier the mental burden they took on, which would make the golems' movements sluggish. In other words, it was incredibly difficult to control that many at once.

Yet despite that, here was Zelos—who'd created more than thirty golems, and was controlling them skillfully to boot. The man clearly had an abnormal amount of power hiding within him; he was far removed from anything Zweit knew.

Every mage dreamed of working for the state. The quickest way to achieve that was to study magic and strategy at the academy, graduate, and sign up for military service under one of the mage factions. So for a Sage-class mage *not* to seek work with the state—nor any other position of authority—but to instead choose the life of a hermit seemed simply absurd. Though he'd proved he was out of Zweit's league, Zelos seemed to have no interest whatsoever in political power; if anything, he'd come out and declared those things to be meaningless. Zweit had never met anyone like him before. The man was an anomaly.

Still, it wasn't as if Zweit's notion of common sense was entirely wrong.

It was a given that magic research required money—and if you wanted to secure that money for yourself, your best bet was to join a powerful faction under the Order of Mages. While there was some level of conflict between the factions, they each received funding from the state every month, so you wouldn't have to worry about going broke.

In contrast, there was no end to the line of mages who fell short and failed to get a position working for the state. Those sorts ended up turning to crime, and they almost invariably wound up destitute. That was what the statistics showed.

The short of it was that funding wasn't easy for mages to come by. After all, they didn't have much of a role to play in society outside of crises.

It was true, then, that most mages not in the state's employ lived in poverty. But the fact that there was a mage like Zelos meant that he must be earning the funds for his research by himself—that he was somehow managing to live off what he earned while also keeping up his research. Research that he used to create powerful spells.

In other words, he was a genius. But Zweit found himself unable to accept that.

“How does he even manage to control that many golems? It's not right!”

“I don’t believe he *is* controlling them all, Sir Zweit.”

“Whoa?! Wh—oh. It’s you, Miska. When did you get here...?”

Before he’d realized, a bespectacled woman in a maid’s uniform had appeared by his side, looking out the window just like he was.

She was Miska—Celestina’s personal maid.

She was an incredibly capable woman, having previously worked at the ducal family’s main residence as the head of the servants. Her sophistication and respectful demeanor had earned her a great deal of trust from the duke. She’d also taken care of Zweit when he was younger.

“Anyway, what do you mean? Does he have some secret or something?”

“There is *something* to it—though Sir Zelos does not seem to treat it as a secret, nor as anything else of the sort. He has even explained it in simple terms to Miss Celestina. I suspect he may see anyone incapable of such a thing as not even being a proper mage...”

“That’s ridiculous. Look at how many golems he’s controlling! How perfectly he’s controlling them! It’s got to be *some* sort of special technique he can’t tell anyone about. It’s absurd enough to be a secret from one of the magic noble families!”

“Is that so? That is merely how it looks to *us*—might such feats not seem rather trivial to a Great Sage? He seems to have explained it to Her Ladyship half because he thought it might be amusing.”

“Tch! So what—he just sees us as weaklings with less power than he’s got in his pinky finger, is that it? So? What is it? How does he manage to control that many golems?”

Zweit was, at the end of the day, a mage. He had a natural interest in the unknown.

And the fact that he wished to know more about Zelos’s control of mud golems—a skill that many had said to be useless—was proof that he hadn’t yet been entirely poisoned by the world of mages obsessed with naught but their own political power.

No. If anything, his mind had felt remarkably clear since he'd exchanged blows with his father.

It had felt as if he'd been haunted by an evil spirit or something—a spirit that had now, somehow, been chased out. Everything around him seemed so much clearer now. But he wasn't quite sure what exactly had happened to him.

Regardless, the more pressing matter on his mind for now was whatever technique allowed Zelos to control so many golems at once.

"Interested, are you? I thought you hated Sir Zelos?"

"Don't make fun of me. I'm still a mage. Of course I'm going to be interested in whatever ridiculous technique he's using."

"Allow me to tell you what I know, then."

Miska pushed her glasses back into place with a finger, then began to explain what she knew, looking almost as if she were enjoying herself.

Zweit hadn't been wrong: the more golems you had, the harder they became to control.

However, while the typical mage controlled their golems directly, Zelos used an entirely different approach. He acted more as a commander of sorts, designating certain golems as squad leaders. Those leaders were capable of passing on basic commands, and they oversaw simpler golems, who then carried out those orders without delay. All Zelos had to do as the caster, then, was hand down a command; the squad leader golems would take that command on, issue basic orders, and direct each of the lower-ranking golems to execute the strategy as needed.

Put simply, it was like Zelos had taken the chain of command that knights used in battle and incorporated it into his golems.

The squad leader golems used larger magic stones and were able to independently replenish golems in their squad. It reduced the mental burden on the caster, and also enabled the sort of delicate control needed for coordination and strategy, even in long battles.

"The magic stones make up for any lack of mana—and while the golems may

be man-made monsters, they provide the perfect training for increasing Miss Celestina's level. Sir Zelos was saying that he could just replenish the mana in the magic stones when they were done."

"Even then, that wouldn't be enough mana to make the golems move, right? At the very least, those higher-level ones would have to use a lot of mana."

"That would appear to be solved by the magic formula he uses for creating the golems. He mentioned something about a... 'Spell Circuit,' I believe? I remember him explaining how he used a 'layered structure' to make the formula more efficient; the specifics were beyond my understanding, however."

"He could use that magic to make his own army corps. The guy's a monster..."

"You say that, and yet I remember him saying, 'I'm nothing too special. My old companions were able to do far more than I can.' He *does* seem to have a good command over everything he tries, but from what I understand, he specializes in attack magic."

"Just how terrifying are those companions of his, then...? And wait—wasn't he saying before that he was good with a sword?"

"They *were* the sort who were mad enough to challenge a behemoth with just five people. All mages. I doubt more normal people like us would be able to understand. He also seems to have trained himself in close-quarters combat to help protect himself."

"The whole party was mages? And— A *behemoth*?! How crazy *is* this guy?!"

A lot of researchers had their quirks; the faction Zweit was affiliated with had its own fair share of people with a screw or two loose. Zelos, however, far surpassed them on that front. He was, after all, apparently reckless enough to challenge a calamity-level monster for the sake of his research.

That was completely at odds with Zweit's notion of common sense. Such recklessness, he thought, could only mean that the man was possessed by some kind of madness. It sent a shiver down the young noble's spine.

At the same time, it served as a reminder of just how large the world really was. Zweit had been so caught up in his crimson robe—the supposed proof of his excellence as a mage. But now, he had come to realize just how insignificant

he was in the grand scheme of things.

“This... This is more than just a gap in experience. I guess I was nothing but an overconfident weakling...”

“Perhaps. You were badly outclassed, though. Your opponent *was* a Great Sage.”

“This whole damn world’s full of mysteries. Who would’ve thought there’d be such a crazy mage out there...?”

“That *is* the very nature of the unknown, I suppose. Perhaps you should devote yourself to its study as well.”

Zweit was realizing once again just how foolish he had been.

“By the way, Miska. Speaking of mysteries...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“It’s been on my mind since I was a kid, but—how old are you? You’ve always looked the same, and while it’s never really bothered me, it *does* seem weird, now that I think of i— *Ahhh!*”

Zweit broke off under Miska’s sinister glower.

Some sort of dark presence coiled its way around Zweit—he’d never felt fear like this before.

Whatever this *thing* was, it filled him with an entirely new form of despair. He understood, instinctively, that he had to run.

What awaited him was death. Unavoidable. Absolute. He might have *realized* how foolish he had been so far, but not only was there nothing he could do about it—no, worse, here he was, committing *yet another* foolish, reckless act.

“A-Aaaargh...”

Miska placed a hand on the young man’s trembling cheek. Right before his eyes, her glasses flashed threateningly—and closer she came.

Closer still.

The fear tightened its grip on Zweit’s heart. A single, genuine thought filled his mind: *I’m going to die.*

“Asking a lady her age is...awfully *rude*, isn’t it? It would be wise of you to let it rest while she still has a smile on her face. Don’t you agree, Sir Zweit?”

“I’m sorry! I-I’ll never do it again...?”

“Let me clarify. Did you just casually ask me my age?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I must have stumbled over my words! O-Or you’re imagining it!”

Zweit prostrated himself on the ground before the maid, apologizing profusely. He had lost to his fear of the unknown.

The experience had taught him two things. First, that there were some things in this world that you were better off not knowing.

And second, that he was indeed a fool...

“Hm? You want me to whip you into shape? Where’s *this* coming from?”

It was the first evening of Zweit’s stay at Creston’s castle. After realizing just how petty he’d been, Zweit had been quick to act. He’d come straight to Zelos with a request—and he was ready to prostrate himself before this foreign mage, if that was what it took.

“Sure, I’ve reached Level 50. But now that I’ve seen how strong *you* are, it’s obvious that I’m still just...so far away from the real heights of magic. I don’t want to live out the rest of my life being mediocre!”

As you might expect, Zweit’s sudden change of attitude left Zelos confused.

This was the same young man who had bullied Celestina when they were younger. And in part because of that, Zelos felt like he might be hard to deal with.

There was, of course, the question of whether Zelos would be able to watch over him and Celestina—who had a complicated history together—at the same time. But perhaps more importantly, he suspected there might be some kind of ulterior motive behind Zweit’s sudden change of heart.

“‘The real heights of magic,’ huh? Honestly, I feel like I’ve still got a long way to go until I get there myself. But anyway—what about that faction of yours,

whatever it was called? Asking me to train you would mean leaving them behind, you know. What's your plan for that?"

"Ugh! Damn it. I'd forgotten about those pests."

Zweit belonged to the Wiesler faction, one of the country's two main factions of mages.

It was a warlike faction with the dogmatic belief that offense was the backbone of magic, and its members were devoted to researching attack spells and combat strategy. Being brought under Zelos's wing would mean leaving them behind. And in all likelihood, the mages of the Wiesler faction would see that as a betrayal. After all, Zweit had seen the spells the faction was developing—and its mages, who were secretive by nature, were united by their hatred of traitors. In the worst-case scenario, Zweit could end up assassinated for leaving. Though to be fair to him, while he *had* seen the faction's recent research, it wasn't as if any of it had yielded results so far.

"So they're going on about the 'backbone of magic,' eh? If you ask me, what *really* makes a mage is just cooping yourself up and messing with whatever magic takes your fancy. Regardless of the nuisance you might be causing other people."

"Coming from *your* mouth, that actually sounds kind of convincing."

"Well, I *was* known as one of the 'Destroyers.' Not that I was the only one, mind you..."

"What do you even have to *do* to get a nickname like that...? Can I ask?"

"Honestly, I'd rather you didn't. It just comes from a lot of stupid stuff I did in my younger days. Stuff I'd rather not admit to."

These "younger days" consisted of things Zelos had done in *Swords & Sorceries*. On some days, he'd worked with his party and other players to develop ridiculous magic, then used it to annihilate his enemies in a raid; on others, he'd turned gankers into his test dummies for experimental magic, or forced them to equip cursed items for the fun of it while he sat by and laughed at them. In short, he'd done some pretty horrible stuff.

And now that Zelos was not an in-game character but rather a real, living

mage, he'd come to realize just how dangerous an individual he really was.

If a man like that had actually existed, he'd have been a full-fledged lunatic. Zelos was sorely aware of how his exploits would sound without the context of his old life.

"I was, uh, a bit of a hothead back then. Worse than you..."

"What do you mean? You kind of look like you're zoning out there."

"One time, I forgot where I was and fired off some wide-area annihilation spell I'd been working on. I ended up getting stuck right in the middle of it—and so did the rest of my party. That really got my heart racing! Their payback was even worse; I thought I was gonna die. I mean, they actually *did* try to kill me..."

"Whoa. It sounds like you got up to some pretty unhinged stuff...and wait—Are you saying your party all *survived* that? How damn tough *were* they?!"

"Yeah, they *did* all have some pretty insane magic resistance and defense. They wouldn't die from a little thing like that. Frankly, if there *is* some way to kill them, I'd love to know it!"

"What do you mean, 'a little thing like that'?! How is a wide-area annihilation spell 'a little thing'?! And why are you talking like you're not just as ridiculous as they are?!"

"I can still remember it now—it ended up turning into this massive slugfest of terrifying spells. Just one injury after another! We even forgot all about the monsters we were meant to be killing. Sure was good that town was in the middle of a desert..."

"What the hell were you thinking?!"

Zelos was recalling a story from his online game, of course—but Zweit, who had no way of knowing that, took his words at face value. Just listening to Zelos speak was enough to make him seem absurd—an anomaly. Yet he continued to reminisce, each old story more insane than the last.

Zweit wanted to be the kind of mage who'd leave a mark on history. And while Zelos seemed to have done just that, he'd done it in the exact opposite way from what Zweit intended.

This wasn't fame; it was infamy. The middle-aged man before him had lived a brutal life, going from rampage to rampage with little regard for other people. Zweit felt like something was wrong with the world if a man like *this* had earned the title of Sage.

"Ah, the good old days..."

"What part of those stories was 'good'?! Was it the part where you and your friends were trying to kill each other? Or the part where you were destroying everything around you in the name of research?!"

Zweit was coming to understand that Sages were far removed from society's version of common sense—they were essentially proud, selfish criminals, who were interested in nothing but researching their magic and testing it out in battle. Other people's wishes didn't even come into it. No, Sages were just walking bundles of chaos, destroying things left, right, and center in the name of "field testing" because *they thought it looked fun*. Or at least, that was the picture Zweit was getting from Zelos's stories.

In short, Zelos was providing the perfect example of what *not* to do as a mage.

"Anyway, setting that aside—what kind of mage do you want to be? I've seen how you let your authority get to your head; I find it hard to believe you've got any particularly noble goals. Or am I wrong?"

"You sure know how to hit me where it hurts...but yes. I want to leave my name in history. I want to be known as a *champion*..."

"That sounds like a bit of a self-serving goal for a person in power, doesn't it? If there's something you want to protect, then hiring some mercenaries would get the job done just as well. Do you really need to be so fixated on becoming a champion?"

"Hm? Can't you become a champion just by being strong enough in battle?"

"Maybe, I guess, depending on what exactly you do. But most 'champions' recognized by the state are people who've died in battle and been given the title after the fact to appease their families. Even *if* you get recognized as one when you're still alive, you're just putting yourself on every enemy country's list

of sworn enemies. Their kill list. That's what history says, at least."

Zelos continued to borrow books from the castle's library in his spare time. As a result, he'd picked up all sorts of information about this world, including its history.

The kind of champion Zweit was thinking of was indeed someone who'd be strong enough to save his comrades on the battlefield. But his enemies would also detest him as the man who'd killed *their* comrades, and he'd be the very first person targeted the next time he stepped onto the battlefield.

The state also wouldn't have an easy time commending any living soldier who'd become the target of such resentment. Doing so would accomplish little apart from stoking the coals of conflict, after all.

Even if you *did* manage to become a living champion despite all that, you'd get dragged into factional disputes between nobles who wanted you to mediate for them. And people in that position had a bit of a tendency to get murdered—it wasn't an easy life, to say the least. Zelos had spent a while looking up the country's history using the books he'd borrowed, but he had yet to hear of a single soldier or mage who'd gone on to die a comfortable death after becoming famous.

It had all led him to conclude that the title of "champion" was anything but desirable.

"Don't you find it pretty ridiculous that someone without the support of the people can even be called a champion in the first place? Honestly, I think you'd be much better off just helping the common people in whatever little ways you can; that way, you'll wind up being remembered as a *true* champion of the people after you've died. You can go to any tavern and run into a whole handful of people who've been officially recognized as champions by the state. But they're all replaceable, 'champions' in name only. People who've been given a title as a convenient little arrangement for both sides. I feel like you should have some sort of *proper* target to strive toward..."

"Are you trying to say that I don't even know what I'm working for? Is that it? I'll tell you now—I want to become a man like my grandfather. And then become an even greater man than he is. Do you have a problem with that?!"

“No, no! I’m not saying that’s a bad goal to have. It’s up to you what you want to become, after all. It’s just that mages are essentially all shut-ins who don’t have a good eye for anything except their own research—so trying to make a name for yourself on the battlefield could very well mean cutting your life short. I guess what I’m trying to say is, you should think about *what* you’re fighting for. Though I know that’s a pretty cliché thing to say.”

The very best mages out there were the kinds of people who were a right pain in the ass to others. With that in mind, it was hard to think of them as champions, at first glance—but their skill was undeniable. That was, after all, how they acquired the job title of Sage. Ultimately, they were the kind of people who could focus on improving themselves before they came to the forefront, finally show some results once they got there, gain the approval of those around them, and become known as a champion *that* way. It wasn’t as if fighting was the only path to success.

By the way, this is what was going through Zelos’s mind as he spoke: *What am I doing, trying to sound all wise like this? I’m the last person who should be giving this sort of advice...*

There was a striking difference between his words and his thoughts.

“Well, it’s fine. I’ve already agreed to be a private tutor here for two months, so I guess adding another student to my roster wouldn’t hurt. Just...don’t expect to get off scot-free if you try and take my lessons with a grain of salt. Keep that in mind, please.”

“Thank you. I promise you, I’ll definitely figure *something* out before I have to go back to the academy.”

“*What* you figure out is going to be up to you, though. There’s not all that much I can actually teach you, you know? I’ve come this far in life by kind of just doing whatever I feel like, after all.”

“I understand. All I want is to change. To say goodbye to the man I’ve been until now.”

Having just learned how wide the world could really be, Zweit had yet to decide on a specific direction to take. But he’d started to walk his own path.

“All right. Starting tomorrow, I’ll have you join Celestina in her battle training classes. I want to help you understand the importance of casting spells without the need for incantations—it’s something you’ll have to do if you really want to move forward with your magic.”

“All right! I’m getting pumped! I’m going to be one of the best mages *ever*, just you watch!”

Zweit’s crushing defeat to Zelos seemed to have had a major effect on the young man’s heart.

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing remained to be seen. But at the very least, it was apparent that it had helped him to look forward, rather than continuing down a spiral of petty greed.

Whatever answers he found beyond that, he would have to find with his own strength...

*

The next day:

“Shit! There’s no way out! What am I even meant to do here?!”

“Brother... Why did you think it’d be a good idea to dive into the middle of the enemies? And into such a big pack of them, at that...”

“They’re only mud golems, so I thought it’d be fine! Since when are mud golems this nasty?!”

“They move slowly, but they’re as cunning as they are slow. I *told* you to be careful, didn’t I?”

“Mud golems shouldn’t *be* this strong! This is ridiculous, I’m telling you! *Ridiculous!*”

The siblings were surrounded by mud golems, getting thoroughly beaten up.

Zelos had figured that putting the two of them together like this would make for good training. After all, they’d inevitably have to team up with people they didn’t get along with at some point in their lives. But they were actually doing better than he’d expected.

That said, while Celestina probably would've been okay if she'd been fighting alone, being with Zweit had gotten *her* into quite the pinch as well—she was now trapped too, needing to break through the ring of golems and escape. Zweit didn't seem to be particularly good at these kinds of fights.

“Mmm. Looks like they've still got a ways to go.” Zelos watched the siblings, evaluating their performance with a harsh eye.

“Ah, Tina is so beautiful when she's got that anguished look on her face...”

By Zelos's side was—as should be no surprise—a certain elderly man, infatuated by the sight of his granddaughter being clobbered by golems.

He was a lost cause, as always.

Chapter 11: The Old Guy Finishes a Training Session and Harvests Mandrakes

Having decided to give Celestina some real combat experience, Zelos was starting to up the intensity of his training. He was now mixing some extra-fast mud golems in among the regular ones.

Compared to the normal mud golems, these were more slender, and they looked quite a bit more fragile. But they were tricky little things, able to leverage their mobility to attack in unusual ways.

Celestina and Zweit were at the mercy of these golems, which were so quick you could barely believe they were made out of mud. What was more, they could weave between the other golems and snake out an arm to trip you up or grab onto you. Sometimes they'd even attack from your blind spot.

In short, they were fine purveyors of foul play. But this kind of training was important—you could never know what was going to happen in a real battle, after all. Plus, it wasn't as if the Far-Flung Green Depths were full of just slimes and goblins. There were huge carnivorous beasts; birds of prey, among other flying monsters; and even a wide array of dangerous plant monsters. The whole place was ruled by survival of the fittest—the strong devouring the weak.

If you wanted to go there and make it out alive, you'd need to be excellent at making spur-of-the-moment decisions, as well as knowing and evaluating your own capabilities. You'd also want to have good enough judgment to turn back if the situation called for it. Even more important than all of that was knowledge to let you see through the kind of traps that were common in the natural world. Celestina and Zweit didn't have the sort of skills that assassins or thieves typically possessed, so all they could do was to compensate with knowledge.

And to that end, Zelos was having the two of them do their own research into monsters by using illustrated books and the like. This was the sort of thing that you'd get a better feel for if you looked into it yourself, rather than just having someone else teach you.

Of course, he was making sure they kept up their mana control training as well.

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“Leave me *alone*, you bastards!”

Zweit swung a longsword with all his might to strike down one of the slender mud golems, then turned to one of the regular golems pressing in on him and cleaved it from head to toe. His attacks were all brute force, without any real elegance.

Celestina, by contrast, was moving deliberately. She was focused on attacking enemies from the side, defending from *their* attacks using her shield, then pulling back to repeat the cycle. It was a fighting style that emphasized safety above all else. And lately, she’d also started to exhibit more technique, putting her all into a fierce strike when necessary.

“You’re going too far ahead, Brother. You’ll get surrounded if you keep going like that!”

“Shut up! I know! But these skinny assholes are really pissing me off...”

Zelos and Creston stood at a distance, calmly observing how the two fought and writing down notes on a thick sheet of paper to help evaluate them. The men’s role was to observe the fight from the side, note any issues, and use that as a reference to teach the two students when they were done, helping them to grow.

“Zweit seems fairly impulsive, doesn’t he? I get the feeling he’s the type to rely on brute force.”

“Indeed. And Tina’s the type to use finesse. Considering her frame and her relative lack of strength, it makes sense for her to keep attacking and retreating like she is.”

“That *should* give them some good synergy as a pair... Their teamwork seems pretty inconsistent, though.”

“Yes. Zweit, the boy, does have a bit of a tendency to follow his emotions without much thought. He sends out attack spells as soon as a fight begins,

rather than trying to conserve his mana, so he gets cornered rather easily as a fight goes on.”

“You can probably chalk that up to his lack of experience. Plus, it looks like he’s focused on practicing his sword skills for now. My guess would be that he’s aware of it himself, and just wants to try and improve one thing at a time.”

“Tina, meanwhile, seems to be trying out all sorts of things. Likely since she started from zero, I suppose. It’s clear as day whenever she changes her approach. You can see she’s flitting from one strategy to another at quite the speed, trying to respond to things differently each time.”

When a fight turned into a melee, you had to consider the risk of getting your allies caught up in your attacks. That was something that Zweit understood; he had experience in real combat training. But he still wasn’t good enough at it to let his partner fully relax around him. If he got emotional, his flaws would come rushing in and sabotage them.

Celestina, who’d been taking part in Zelos’s training for a while now, was focused on staying calm and making counterattacks whenever the opportunity arose. It was a reliable strategy, in a sense—but it was also really *all* she was doing. She wasn’t really capable of landing huge, devastating blows.

The reason that she’d been able to put up a decent fight so far was because mud golems were relatively fragile enemies.

“I could summon a bunch of stone golems or rock golems instead, but as they are now, I can see the two of them getting badly injured if I did that. I want to keep it to enemies they can beat in a single hit.”

“You continue to say some absurd things. You are about the only man who would be capable of such a feat... You *do* realize that, yes?”

“Couldn’t *anyone* do that with enough sword practice? Not sure how long it’d take to get to that point, though.”

“I dare say it would be nigh impossible, unless you spent every day on the battlefield. You truly are fearsome...”

Unlike in the game, martial arts skills weren’t something you could master unless you dedicated your whole life to them. But it was only now that Zelos

was starting to realize that crucial gap between the real world and the game world. If you wanted to hone your skills in reality, you would've needed to devote vast amounts of time and hard work, with no exceptions.

Of course, it was possible to learn various skills through certain kinds of training. But if you wanted to then *master* those skills, you'd need to build up quite a lot of experience with them. It had taken some time, but it was finally starting to click for Zelos that his new reality wasn't the same as the game he'd played in his old world.

"Brother! To your left!"

"Wha— *Gah!*"

One of the slender mud golems had let its lower half deform, stretched its arm out into a whip, then used that whip to lash out at Zweit from under the groin of a particularly large mud golem.

"These attacks are just bizarre. This could be difficult..."

"Oh, you've done it now! *Fireball!*"

Still collapsed on the ground, Zweit sent an attack spell hurtling straight toward the slender mud golem.

He'd forgotten, however, that this particular golem moved quite a bit faster than the regular ones. It dodged Zweit's frustrated Fireball with ease.

"Y-You prick!"

"Don't get impatient, or you'll fall right into Master's trap. I think he's getting them to specifically aim for you, since your movements are so predictable. Likely to make us work together."

"What?! Are you—are you trying to say that *I'm* holding us back?!"

"It's true! If we show any openings, Master *will* attack them, without fail. He's already done the same thing to me, over and over again. And he's probably looking to do it again at this very moment..."

"So he's trying to make this a real, hardcore fight then, huh? Jeez, he's merciless..."

Zweit glared at Zelos, his eyes full of resentment.

In real combat, though, you couldn't ask for a do-over. It was only natural that he'd be harsh on them.

"Of *course* I'm being merciless. If I'm going to be training you, I want you to be serious about it. If you leave yourself open, a monster *will* go for that opening, you know? Getting that into your head is going to be essential if you want to survive; it never hurts to be too careful. And the monsters in that damn forest can be more cunning than humans..."

"I get it, I get it. If you die in a real fight, it's all over. There's no way monsters are gonna hold back for you. That's what you're saying, right?"

"Mmm hmm. I want you to be able to hold out for three hours, minimum. Being alone in the middle of a huge forest means constantly having death knocking at your door—so if you want to stay alive, you'll need a calm head, plenty of power, and the will to survive. If you try and bring needless pride and posturing into the mix, you won't just get *yourself* killed—it'll be your allies as well. Life is cheap in that place..."

"*Ngh...* It pisses me off, but you make a good point. Especially knowing what you've gone through. I bet you've been in all *sorts* of hells worse than that."

"Yeah, that *was* kind of the least of it. I've spent a lot of time in places where you can't let your guard down for even a moment. And you can't exactly run away from a pack of wyverns! Ah, that really was a pain..."

"I don't doubt it. I guess I really *was* naive, then. So there are all sorts of even crazier monsters out there, huh..."

It looked like Zweit had been telling the truth when he said he wanted Zelos to whip him into shape. He was listening earnestly to what the Great Sage had to say.

To be even just a little bit careless was to invite death; that was practically a law of nature. Out there, you could never be guaranteed the sort of safety you'd find in human society—the monsters that survived into old age were inevitably the ones that were particularly strong or cunning. It was a fierce struggle for survival, playing out over and over again.

The environment in that forest was far more dangerous than what humans were used to, and it stretched beyond the horizon.

“Now, don’t expect to get strong in just a day or two. And there’s no such thing as ‘absolute’; even someone with a lot of power can lose their life if they let their guard down. So if you want to survive, all you can do is train, train, train. No matter how long you look, you’ll never find a safe and easy path to getting strong.”

While Zelos certainly *sounded* all high and mighty, his inner voice went a bit more like this: *What am I trying to sound so wise for? If these two end up dying now, it’ll be because I taught them wrong, and then I could be held responsible. Reality’s not the same as my old game—if it turns out that my training isn’t enough to improve their skills and help them survive, who knows what the crazy old man next to me would do...* At the end of the day, Zelos was a rather timid man—a worrywart.

In his defense, nobody would want to shoulder the responsibility for other people’s lives, and it was hard to deny that his teaching methods could determine whether his two students lived or died. While *he* had essentially come into this world with cheats turned on, those two hadn’t even been properly trained yet. And with their levels as low as they were, heading into an environment where they could potentially be killed in a single hit was inherently dangerous.

That was precisely why Zelos was having these golems use every last nasty attack he could think of: it was to teach these two as many tricks as he could for staying alive.

“Good, good... I’m starting to feel like I can really change myself! They never taught us this kinda stuff at the academy!”

“It sure sounds like they’re fairly lax there, huh? Out here, you can fail as many times as you want. I won’t mind. I just want you to look for the fighting style that suits you best, give it a proper try in battle, and make it your own. If you do, it’ll be your foundation going forward—and your strength.”

Seriously, what the hell am I even saying?! There’s no way I’m qualified to be saying this sort of stuff! I just...can’t actually think of anything else to do for

classes. I guess they're not the only ones who need to shape up...

Zelos's inner monologue was the polar opposite of his words. But as a private tutor, he couldn't expect his students to follow him if he came across as meek and uncertain. No—he had to seem confident. Commanding. It was almost like he was trying to channel a certain military training scene from a famous movie, or the philosophy of a well-known kung fu movie.

“Master really is strict...but I'm happy to have the opportunity to find what fighting style suits me best.”

“Yeah, this is much more up my alley than just having a bunch of goblins let loose for target practice. These things actually hit back properly, for one.”

“I'll heal you if you get hurt, by the way. I might not look it, but I *am* decent at healing magic as well.”

If the pair got knocked down and injured, Zelos could just heal them right back up—and so the hellish training could continue without end. The fact that their safety was largely ensured also meant that the two were free to temper their skills as they wished.

Plus, they were able to learn that in a real fight, there was no such thing as an enemy that moved exactly how you predicted. You'd inevitably end up in some unexpected situations. And from time to time, they were being put in situations in which they were at an overwhelming disadvantage, which allowed them to prepare for that as well.

In that regard, it would've been fair to say that Zelos's training was pretty well thought-out...even if it *was* ultimately just based on a method that he'd used to help his allies level up in an online game.

Back in the game, this method had been new—multiple guilds had devised it together to help train new players who'd just joined. It was used to get their skills and levels up to a reasonable standard, at which point the more experienced players would form a party with them and head out on quests. It was the perfect approach for training newbies—but in reality, you'd have to contend with the fact that controlling that many golems was rather taxing on the mind. The training method that Zelos used now was an imitation of what he'd used in game, but setting it up in reality was a bit of a hassle.

“All right! Come at me, you bastards!”

“I don’t mind you getting into it. But you should make sure to always keep your composure. Getting too carried away just puts you on a one-way track to death, you know? I want you to remember that the enemies you see in front of you aren’t the only ones you have to contend with—you’ve got to worry about the enemies inside your own mind as well.”

“Training that’s as close as possible to real combat, huh...? I can’t wait! Just you watch—I’ll beat whatever comes at me!”

“I can’t teach you two all the answers. It’s not like I’ve got some grand philosophical understanding of life—and besides, your lives are your own. About all I can do is recreate all the battles I’ve been in as best I can remember, and let the two of you experience the same thing.”

“Wait a second! Y-You’re telling me that—that the situation we’re in now is...”

“Mmm hmm. It’s the same hell I experienced back when I was younger. So many of my comrades lost their lives that day...”

“Seriously...? So *that’s* why it felt so brutal.”

Of course, what Zelos was really talking about was a raid group he’d been in back when he was playing *Swords & Sorceries*. They’d been out on a quest to exterminate a group of orcs that had multiplied out of control.

At the time, a bad call by his guild master—who’d been in charge of strategy—had seen most of the raid members die and have to resurrect. Not long after, Zelos had abandoned the idea of being in a guild and decided to be a solo player.

Though the cause was really just that that *particular* guild master was rather careless.

“Even unintelligent monsters can be a real threat en masse. Especially if you’re in the middle of a melee where you can’t use wide-area annihilation magic. When you get stuck in a situation like that, everything comes down to your individual talents and your teamwork.”

“So you just die if you’re crap at close-quarters combat, huh? And we’re training in fights based on real battles you’ve been in... Damn, this is the best.”

“As much as it frustrates me, I agree with him. I feel like I understand what you’re trying to teach us, Master—that we need to learn all sorts of tricks to survive if we want to stay alive.”

“When push comes to shove, a mage who can’t use their magic is just a hindrance. Especially if you’re stuck sitting there useless in a fight you can’t retreat from. You end up slowing your comrades down, and...well, at that point, it’s likely just a matter of time before you die. And probably cause some casualties among your comrades in the process. I guess it does depend on the situation, though.”

Zelos was fully aware that he was making most of this up.

However, he didn’t exactly have a lot of real wisdom to share with the two. Whenever he’d played *Swords & Sorceries*, he’d always just done as he pleased, making himself a nuisance to everyone around him. He’d even quite enjoyed doing so.

The truth, then, was that he didn’t have all that much experience with group combat in raids. Most of his time had just been spent rampaging around with his few companions.

That being the case, his only choice was to try and *sound* confident. In short, he was talking out of his ass.

“Certainly... They *did* teach us to retreat right away if a fight turned into a melee. But I guess you can’t always expect to have that option on the battlefield. You probably *will* end up getting surrounded and stuck in this sort of situation sooner or later, huh...”

“How often *would* we even be able to retreat, I wonder? If you’re in a war, it’s not like you’ll be the only ones with a strategy; your opponents will have one as well, right? I don’t think things will always be so convenient...”

“You’re both right. It really *does* sound like they’re pretty lax at that academy of yours. Common sense says you should always assume the worst...”

“I don’t even know what to say to that. But I’m pretty sure you’re right—the

academy's training isn't enough. You can't expect all your enemies to be weaklings and morons."

Zelos took out a pocket watch—and after checking the time, he gave a wry smile.

"Two hours. For the next two hours, you'll be stuck in a melee. I want you to see if you can make it through. Give it your best shot."

"Um... Master? We're about to run out of mana at any moment now..."

"What, do you think real enemies would wait for your mana to come back? You've got to be able to survive in this kind of situation. If you can, you'll be able to bring back information about your enemies, and use it to prepare for later battles."

"So you're saying the real do-or-die situation starts when you're out of mana, huh? And we get to try it out in a real fight? With the chance for a do-over? I like the sound of that..."

"I understand. I'll make it through to the end, just you wait!"

"All right, then. Starting now, I'll get *serious* with controlling the golems. It's going to be tough, but I want you to come with everything you've got."

The mud golems started to line up, getting into battle formation.

Even among monsters, you'd occasionally find particularly intelligent individuals leading packs. It wasn't rare for them to use these sorts of tactics.

All in all, the training was an accurate recreation of real combat. The two students felt a mix of nervousness and excitement.

This is it! This is what I wanted! Just what I'd expect from a Sage. The guy's merciless!

For quite some time now, Zweit had felt like the training at the academy was lacking. So for him, the training he'd been put into over the last few days—far tougher than anything he'd faced before—felt like it was truly worth doing.

Celestina, meanwhile, understood that these real combat situations were the best experience she could possibly get. *It seems like Master's specifically putting us through difficult training so that we don't die. As his apprentice, I have to*

meet his expectations!

She was serious enough to embrace that opportunity, whatever it took. All the while, her opinion of Zelos was only rising higher and higher.

Both of Zelos's students, then, were all fired up. Yet the man himself was, well...

Ahh... Have I screwed up here, I wonder? That raid back then was just an endless swarm of orcs. It was hell. Have I gotten a little carried away here? They're not going to end up holding a grudge against me for this, are they?

He was thinking back on his time in *Swords & Sorceries*, comparing it with reality, and getting anxious as a result. His mind was flitting from one concern to another.

While Zelos's old digital world resembled his new reality, they were completely different worlds. However much his old experiences were *similar* to this world, differences would inevitably appear in the details. So he was worried about where to draw the line between the two.

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All at once, the golems started to move.

The nightmarish two hours had begun.

"Zelos, let me ask... Is that *really* the best you could do for Tina's equipment?"

"Creston..." Zelos sighed. "You really like to ask for some unreasonable things, don't you?"

Celestina's armor consisted of a cheap leather vest and a steel buckler. They were complemented by a mace; it was the stereotypical set of flimsy-looking beginners' equipment. But with her opponents being mud golems, you'd *want* your equipment to be cheap. Stuff that you wouldn't mind getting dirty.

"Whatever she's wearing, it's going to get caked in mud anyway. It's pretty much going to be disposable, so cheap stuff's more than enough. Besides, her opponents are essentially just dolls made out of clay, you know?"

"Be that as it may...it's disappointing. I'd have at least liked to see her in armor over a pure white dress..."

“It’d only get stained as soon as she hit her first enemy, Creston. And there’s no way you’re getting a stain like that out of fabric, however hard you wash it.”

“Hmph. It’s still a disgrace. To think that my adorable Tina would be made to wear such frumpy equipment...”

“Come on. If you go out onto the battlefield wearing white armor, you’re pretty much just screaming ‘please aim at me.’”

As always, Creston was fixated on his granddaughter.

“What about your other grandchild? You’re not going to complain about *his* equipment?”

“Zweit’s a man. It doesn’t matter what he wears, does it?”

Zelos let out a silent sigh.

Zweit was clad in the academy’s designated training equipment, looking every bit as much a beginner as Celestina.

But while he, too, was Creston’s grandchild, the difference in his and Celestina’s genders seemed to have the old man treating them as complete opposites. Zweit, who respected his grandfather greatly, wouldn’t have been thrilled to hear it. Only the gods could know whether Zweit’s efforts would finally be rewarded some day.

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Two hours later, about the only thing keeping Zweit and Celestina on their feet was sheer willpower.

This was the first time either of them had been in such a lengthy bout of combat training—and they had, quite literally, felt for themselves just how painful a realistic training session could be.

“How was it? On a real battlefield, you’ll be in a situation like this for six days, at least. Maybe even a whole month, at the longest. But what’d you think about your first taste of that sort of battle?”

“I-It’s incredibly difficult... Do fights like that really stretch on for so long...?”

“It hurts so damn much. But...*that’s* what real battle’s like, huh? The academy

hasn't just been lax—they've been full-on babying us..."

"What you experienced here was practically just a little skirmish. A full-scale war would be nothing compared to that. You'd have multiple squads, each under their own commanders, all coordinating to carry out real strategies, you know? It's a far worse hell than this."

"*Seriously?! Aha ha... This is really something! I'm damn lucky to be able to take part in this.*"

The two were almost completely out of mana, but they were filled with a sense of accomplishment at having succeeded.

Zelos handed each of them a small wine bottle.

"Master? What are these?"

"Mana potions. Since we helped the orphanage start growing mandrakes, I got them to share some with us, and I used them to make these. Really, though, those things can multiply like you wouldn't believe! With how fast they grow, the whole field was just about taken over by them in a few days."

"Is the orphanage really growing something like that? And, wait, you're saying *you* were the one to suggest it?!"

"They're also growing some medicinal herbs. It should give them a decent income from here on out."

The mandrakes planted at the orphanage were growing at an abnormal rate. They'd sprouted in a single day, and it had only taken three days for them to be ready to harvest. The problem was that they'd grown so quickly that the majority of the field was at risk of being covered with the things, so it was important to pull them out without delay.

If the whole field got covered by mandrakes, the orphanage wouldn't be able to grow any vegetables, and the soil's nutrients would all be used up. Free from the presence of the herbivorous monsters that loved to dine on the mandrakes, they were at no risk of being eaten, so they continued to simply multiply with abandon.

As a result, the decision had been made to thin out the mandrakes by

harvesting some while they were still young and not yet fully grown. Those early-harvest mandrakes had then been used to make mana potions—the same ones Zweit and Celestina were holding now.

“Not that it really matters, but...”

“Yes...”

“What is it?”

“Why are they in wine bottles?!” Zweit and Celestina both cried at once.

“Ah. I didn’t have any proper potion bottles on me, so I just reused some bottles I had lying around. What about it?”

The contents of the bottles were definitely mana potions. But with bottles like these, Zweit and Celestina couldn’t drink the potions without looking like a couple of youngsters getting drunk in broad daylight—in short, their appearance made them awkward to use. Zelos had only been trying to recycle, but the result of that was that his potions could end up leading to a rather unfortunate misunderstanding, depending on who was using them and where.

It was a trivial problem—one born from a difference in values. But for the son and daughter of a powerful noble family, public image was important, after all.

“Well, that’s it for today. Tomorrow will be business as usual. By the way, Creston, have you got any updates on the equipment you’re getting made for the two of them? Weren’t we planning to have them try out real combat pretty soon?”

“That shall be no problem. I’ve been informed that they will be finished rather soon.”

“Happy to hear it. What about the knights to guard them, then?”

“Mmm. I’m told they’ll be sending us a number of young ones to do the job. I swear, that Delthasis. Such a miser. He should have at least been willing to send us a couple of army divisions, that wretched son of mine!”

“That’s ridiculous!” Zelos and Zweit both cried out, exasperated. “And isn’t that double what you were mentioning the other day?!”

“Grandfather...” Celestina said. “That’s clearly going too far, however you look

at it.”

Ever since it had been decided that the pair would train in the Far-Flung Green Depths, Creston had been asking Delthasis, the current duke, to loan him some guards from the Order of Knights. A whole division, at that.

Of course, it just simply wouldn’t have been plausible to send out the Order of Knights in such a major capacity. Delthasis wouldn’t have been able to justify it to the public.

But old Creston’s nature as a doting grandfather knew no bounds. If it was for the sake of his beloved granddaughter, he’d do whatever he could, outrage be damned.

There was no end to his stubbornness.

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After the combat training, Zelos went to show his face at the orphanage.

It was time to harvest the mandrakes again, so he’d come looking even rougher than usual. But when he arrived, he saw Luceris rubbing her brow, clearly troubled by something.

He hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should really call out to her. But ultimately, his curiosity won out, and so call out he did.

“What’s the problem, Luceris?”

“Ah... Zelos. Thank you for coming.”

“It looks like you’ve got something on your mind. Did something bad happen? You seem kind of down.”

“You see, we’ve had a bit of a problem with the mandrakes...”

“What sort of problem, exactly? Let’s hear it.”

“Well, um... It’s probably fastest to just show you. Come and take a look.”

“Sure...”

Luceris took Zelos by the arm and led him to the field.

In the process, she just happened to hold his arm against her chest. It was all

too stimulating for Zelos; his mind went into overload.

S-Such big boobs! The sheer volume of these things...this is dangerous! Crap, I've got to stop myself before I give in to my instincts. I'm so glad I'm alive...

He was, after all, a forty-year-old man who'd never once had a girlfriend.

Not only was he a pervert; he'd never built up any resistance against this sort of casual contact.

While he felt like it was a dangerous situation to be in, he was also wishing he could spend the rest of his life just like that.

And then they reached the field.

GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

The sound of a chilling death throe pierced the sky.

Zelos was reminded of the door to the magic tool shop.

"Wh-What *is* that?"

"It happened when we started to pull out the mandrakes. And the children have been enjoying it..."

An awkward silence ensued.

Looking out over the field, Zelos saw four children merrily pulling mandrakes out of the ground.

Noooooooooooooooooooo!

Stooooooooooooooooop!

"Aha ha ha! This is *fun*!"

"My one was louder!"

GRUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

"Whoaaaa! Cool! Let's try and make 'em scream even *more*!"

YOU MURDEREEEEEEEEER!

"See, my one was better! You hear that? It called me a murderer! This is so cool!"

To the kids, picking the mandrakes was just some simpleminded fun—but watching on, you couldn't help but interpret it as some horrible crime. Each time one of them gleefully plucked a mandrake out of the dirt, it'd let out a bizarre scream.

From the mandrakes' perspective, it might well have been akin to torture, after all...

"It, uh... It kind of looks like they're doing something evil, doesn't it? That can't be great for their upbringing. I knew mandrakes were meant to make noise when you picked them, but I didn't think it'd be *this* bad..."

"They didn't scream at all when we were thinning out the field the other day... What should we do?"

"Honestly, I don't have a clue. About the only idea I've got is just to...get used to it, I guess?"

"I don't *want* to get used to this! I can feel their screams piercing right through to my soul!"

Given how fast they grew, mandrakes multiplied at an incredible rate. Enough so that they'd take over the whole field in a flash if you let them.

By thinning out the younger mandrakes as much as you could before that happened, the remaining ones would grow better, providing high-quality effects when you eventually harvested them. But the flip side was that those fully grown mandrakes would scream out like this the moment you pulled them out of the ground.

If you picked them while they were still young, they didn't scream—but if you let them grow all the way and harvested them at the optimal time, they'd scream rather impressively, just like this. The bloodcurdling noises made it sound like they were the victims of some horrible tragedy; it was enough to grind down the spirits of the people tasked with harvesting them. In short, they could break your mind.

"I can imagine the rest of the neighborhood getting the wrong impression from this. I wouldn't be surprised if you guys get reported..."

"It's *already* happened! Multiple times! And every time, I wind up having to

show this field to whatever guards come to investigate...”

Frightening screams were echoing out from the back of an old church, after all. It was almost like the setup to a horror story.

What did that make the kids, then, who were pulling out those mandrakes with such glee? *Are they just sadistic little devils or something?* Zelos wondered.

HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!

“You hear that? That one screamed for help!”

“Meh. Middle of the road.”

“Not creative enough. Feels kinda bland.”

“Yeah. I want to hear it, like, *really* screaming, from the bottom of its heart, you know?”

The kids were merciless. They were indeed little devils. Mischievous, energetic devils.

“Well, at least this’ll get the orphanage some money. We should probably just pull ourselves together and help with the harvesting.”

“That’s impossible! It *already* feels like I’m guilty enough for my heart to split in two!”

“That *does* sound pretty bad. Well, I guess I’ll try and pull one out myself, for starters...”

As Zelos spoke, he grabbed onto the stem of a nearby mandrake and pulled it out with all his might.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! I’M BEING VIOLATEEEEEEEED!

“So *that’s* what you go with for me, eh? That’s low. Anyway, yeah, this is...”

Zelos had underestimated the mandrakes. He hadn’t thought they’d go after him from *that* angle—and now, as you’d expect, he had a cold sweat running down his back. It was even enough to make Luceris, who was watching, shoot him a cold gaze.

“Zelos, did you really...”

“I didn’t do anything! This is what the mandrakes do! They scream, okay?!”

This was becoming an unpleasant experience in all sorts of ways. At any rate, it was quickly becoming clear: simply pulling out a mandrake was enough to potentially get you labeled as a criminal.

“Do you understand now? I *told you* it was bad for your heart...”

“Yeah. I was taking it too lightly. I never would’ve thought it’d be that bad... I can see these things getting people pulled up on all sorts of false charges. Why are the damn things acting like sadistic high school girls who make up lies about guys groping them in packed trains?!”

“I’m not quite sure I follow your example, but...yes, they do seem to make up all sorts of false accusations, don’t they?”

It was so bad that, if they were reported by neighbors who knew nothing about the situation, they could end up getting arrested as brutal degenerates. The fact remained, however, that they had to harvest the mandrakes.

If they didn’t, the whole field would be taken over by the things, and the vegetables that everyone had gone to all the effort of growing would wind up completely dying out.

Plus, now was the ideal time to harvest the mandrakes, as far as their growth was concerned. In other words, harvesting them now would maximize the profits when they were sold.

And if Zelos and the others missed this chance, the mandrakes would release their seeds, multiplying completely out of control.

PLEASE! IF YOU’RE GOING TO KILL ME, MAKE IT QUIIIIIIIICK!

I WON’T YIELD TO YOU MONSTEEEEEEERS!

A CURSE ON YOU ALL, YOU DEMONSSSSSSSS!

“Aha ha ha ha ha! Those were some good ones!” It seemed like the kids were all happy with that batch.

The adults, meanwhile, had their decency to contend with. They couldn’t help but take some terrible mental damage from it all.

They were truly envious of the children, who seemed able to pull up the mandrakes without a worry in the world.



AHHHH! MORE! MOOOORE! HARDER! A-AHHH...≡

“Huh? That’s a new one.”

“That one’s a perv!”

“What does it mean by ‘harder’? Should we try asking Sister?”

“Yeah, let’s ask her. Or maybe Pops.”

“No! Stay away! Don’t ask us, please! It’s still too early for you!” Luceris and Zelos responded as one.

Whether it was intentional or just a coincidence, the mandrake had piqued the kids’ curiosity.

And that one had done some real psychic damage to the two adults.

The mandrake was truly something to be feared. It had set a trap worthy of Kongming; a scheme so dastardly you wouldn’t believe it had come from a mere plant.

For Luceris, who’d never had a boyfriend in her eighteen years, and Zelos, a middle-aged man who’d never been married, the children’s purehearted questioning was a form of brutal torture.

“What a terrifying plant. It’s almost like it knows exactly what to say to wear away at our minds.”

“It’s going to make our lives easier, but I feel like I might go crazy before it does...”

Luceris and Zelos alike would go on to rack their brains for the best way to raise the children going forward.

Only later did they realize that Zelos could have just used his earth-manipulating Gaia Control spell to harvest the mandrakes far more quickly. It was a realization that sent the two of them into a deep pit of depression and regret.

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About six hours had passed.

By the time the harvest was done, Zelos and Luceris were both exhausted from the mandrakes' mental warfare.

While they weren't *physically* fatigued, their minds had been completely battered and bruised, and their expressions were starting to show some signs of insanity.

Both of them had empty eyes, devoid of any light; and they had faint, creepy smiles on their faces as they muttered away to thin air.

"Wonder what happened to Sister and Pops?"

"Whatever. More importantly, what are we meant to do with these?"

"Line 'em up to dry out in the shade. That's what Pops was saying."

"I wanna eat meat. Gimme meat..."

The kids, in contrast, were still full of energy.

They weren't exactly motivated to work, but they still got straight to storing the mandrakes just like Zelos had taught them earlier, lining them up in a storage room out behind the orphanage to dry.

Thanks to their tenacity, the orphanage's finances started to improve—and two days later, they were able to eat proper meals.

But from that day on, when its inhabitants weren't in earshot, the townsfolk would start referring to the orphanage as "the Church of Screams."

What was more, thieves who'd heard rumors about the mandrakes started creeping into the field at night to try and take some for themselves—though they inevitably wound up getting arrested when the mandrakes' screams alerted the neighbors.

Maybe mandrakes were the perfect burglar alarms.

*

A few days later, late at night:

THIIIIIEEEEF!!!

A mandrake's scream echoed throughout the quiet night sky.

“What the— Fuck! Shut up!”

“Shit! Run!”

“Burglars! Get ’em!” Five voices rang out together as a group of villagers emerged from the shadows.

“Why the fuck are there so many people here?!”

“How would I know?!”

Another night, another pair of foolish thieves caught in the field—all thanks to the mandrakes.

At the same time, a number of the townsfolk had started up a bit of side hustle, catching any prospective thieves and handing them over for money.

They would wait at night for thieves to come, then move in to capture them as soon as they appeared. Luceris was entirely clueless as to this little system the town had set up.

Tonight, once again, the townsfolk were lying in wait. For the next foolish thieves who’d step into their trap...

Chapter 12: The Old Guy Meets the Duke

Zweit had a younger brother and a younger sister, each from a different mother.

His brother's name was Croesus. He was *almost* the same age as Zweit; both were seventeen years old.

Having been born at around the same time, the two of them were seen as rivals to the ducal succession. But Croesus showed no interest whatsoever in other people, preferring to just brush them off coolly.

Zweit had always been a belligerent boy, but Croesus didn't even try to see him as a person. He extended this same lack of interest to humanity as a whole; all of his attention was dedicated to his magic research.

Eventually, Zweit had realized that it wasn't as if Croesus *hated* people—he just simply didn't care for anything except his research. From that point on, he'd stopped trying to quarrel with his younger brother.

Both brothers' attitudes continued to shape their circumstances, giving rise to a succession dispute. But that didn't really bother Zweit all that much.

That was one thing Zweit shared with Croesus: his indifference toward anything that didn't interest him personally.

Zweit's other sibling was his younger sister, Celestina. She was sitting beside him right now, absorbed in breaking down and deciphering magic formulas.

She was an illegitimate daughter, born after Delthasis—their father, the current duke—had, in his words, “found himself suddenly aroused” by a servant girl and laid his hands on her. The moment the first and second duchesses—Zweit's and Croesus's mothers—had found out about this, they'd kicked Celestina's mother out of the ducal residence without delay.

It was an attempt to prevent any *more* rivals from appearing in the battle for succession, and to keep away any women who might otherwise attract Delthasis, their husband.

Celestina's grandfather Creston had promptly taken the girl's mother under his protection. And when the girl was eventually born, he had quickly become infatuated with her.

Ultimately, Celestina's mother had passed away from illness at a young age, leaving Creston to raise her alone. But the beautiful looks she'd inherited from her mother were an eyesore for the two duchesses, who came to view her as an enemy.

What was more, the duchesses' views had a significant impact on their sons. Zweit, in particular, began to bully the girl from a young age, while Croesus simply ignored her as a matter of fact. Because of all this, Celestina began holing herself up alone as time went on.

As Zweit saw it, the Solistia ducal family was a branch of the country's royal family, and they had protected the country for some 150 years as a family of mages. Naturally, he took pride in his ancestors' accomplishments, and he dreamed of one day becoming the sort of man who could protect his country just like they had.

Yet his sister, Celestina, was, for whatever reason, unable to use magic—and despite that, *she* was the one who had ended up favored by their grandfather, whom Zweit so respected. He didn't like it, not one bit. He couldn't accept such an incompetent girl as his sister, nor the fact that a laggard like her was the one who got to accompany the renowned "mage of purgatory." And on top of that, his mother's loathing for the girl had rubbed off on him—he scorned her without ever really questioning why.

Now, however, Zweit had come to discover that Celestina had never been incompetent at magic. It was just that the most commonly used magic formulas—which nobody had ever really questioned—were full of flaws.

From the rumors he'd heard, Celestina struggled to actually *activate* spells, but she excelled at her classroom learning. While she was a failure of a mage, she earned outstanding grades in every other respect; it wasn't as if she was without her talents. And now, the one obstacle that had been holding her back was gone.

Cleared away by the private tutor that stood before them now: the Great

Sage.

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“What that means is, if you decipher this magic formula, you get this: ‘Concentrate the flow of mana and set a mana cost of between 10 and 60.’ The lower number here is the minimum amount of mana required to use the spell, and the higher number is the maximum amount of mana it can control; you can also see it as representing the formula’s mana durability. You see, magic formulas need a certain amount of mana—putting *more* mana than that into them doesn’t increase their power any further. If anything, adding any excess creates a counter-current of mana, which overflows from the magic formula and just gets wasted.”

Frankly, Zweit didn’t like the Great Sage.

However, the man had earned the recognition of the grandfather he so respected—and above even that, he clearly had overwhelming power, which meant Zweit had to try and make use of him. Or at least, that had been the story just a few days ago...

“Does that mean that if you increase or decrease the amount of mana a formula requires, the range of the spell’s power might change as well? At least with a simple magic formula, that seems like it would happen, wouldn’t it?” Celestina asked.

“The short answer is yes, but it’s not that straightforward, you know? If you modify a spell to use more mana, you’ll also be changing the formula’s durability; its ability to store that mana and convert it into whatever phenomenon you’re trying to achieve.”

“However much mana you put in,” Zelos continued, “if the sigil that contains your magic formula is too fragile, the mana will just disperse, and there’ll be no point in having added all that mana in the first place. Not to mention, if the sigil collapses, it can cause a chain reaction that can end up in a lot of casualties. Well, most of the time, the formula itself will collapse first and nothing will happen, though.”

The middle-aged mage continued his lesson on magic formulas.

Despite the man's dull tone, the lectures were going into much more detail than Zweit had expected, and he was enjoying them immensely. All sorts of things he didn't know were being explained to him in a way that was easy to understand, and he was having no difficulty cramming all of it into his head. Essentially, he was learning a lot. It was a fresh experience for him, and he was enjoying every day.

"That sounds like it could be a problem. So on top of changing the amount of mana required, you'll also need a formula for improving the strength of the sigil, yes? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, and layered formulas are what make that possible. You can use two magic formulas together to make mana circulate between them; that creates something called a 'Spell Line.' If you're making a huge magic formula—for, let's see, something like area magic—then you'd normally need to write it down on a pretty massive sheet of paper, if you're using a regular sigil. But by splitting that formula into multiple parts, and then adding in a processing formula to act as an intermediary between them, you can make your magic formulas more compact."

He was a more impressive man than Zweit had been expecting.

This was the first time he'd ever felt such admiration for someone other than his grandfather. Zelos, after all, was a man who cared nothing for currying favor with the rich and powerful. Rather, he prioritized his own way of living—so much so that he wouldn't hesitate to fight anyone who stood in the way of that—and took pride in his lifestyle as a mage.

Perhaps Zweit's sudden change in values was causing him to exaggerate, but to his eyes, Zelos had come to look like some sort of higher being, constantly testing out his magic in battle and then revising it as he walked the path to becoming the ultimate mage. And it certainly didn't hurt that he was exceptional enough to have been recognized by Zweit's much-respected grandfather.

That same grandfather—Creston—had long caused a stir among the factions by criticizing mages obsessed with their authority and political power and telling them how a mage should *really* be. This was seen as a betrayal by the Wiesler

faction, to which he had once belonged, but given the considerable gap between their influence and Creston's own, they hadn't been able to get him assassinated or even warn him to stop. Not to mention, he was related to royalty, so the faction didn't want to make an enemy of him.

Specifically, Creston had declared, "Any miscreant obsessed with their own authority is no true mage; a true mage is one who works to improve themselves." He had then stopped involving himself with the major factions whatsoever, and created his very own faction, albeit only a small one.

And now, here before Zweit's eyes, was Zelos, who seemed to embody the very ideal of that "true mage."

Not only was he a powerful Sage, but he also pursued research using his own earnings and carried out an endless cycle of theory and practice, still managing to avoid even the smallest amounts of waste.

He was also rather *out there* as far as researchers went, having abundant experience in combat and even familiarity with life on the battlefield.

Whether you wanted to or not, you had to admit just how insignificant other mages seemed compared to Zelos. That was just how large the gap in power was.

"Okay—any other questions?"

How could you doubt the excellence of a mage who was even capable of deciphering magic letters?

In Zweit's eyes, this mage—who surpassed even his respected grandfather—was almost a godlike being. And the young man understood that he was barely a novice; an upstart who couldn't even *begin* to compare himself to the Great Sage. The lessons of the past few days had made that perfectly clear to him.

Despite being far better than the teachers at the Istol Academy of Magic, Zelos cared nothing whatsoever for factions or the sort—to the extent that he seemed almost arrogant. But for a mage, even that came across as honorable, in a way.

Most mages either tried to curry favor with nobles or aimed to join some kind of state organization. But Zelos was an exception, choosing to do neither.

It was Zweit's turn to ask a question now. "So I get that it's possible to decipher magic letters. But how many spells a person can learn depends on the individual, right? So how do you decide which spells suit you best? From what you're saying, there's no such thing as being good or bad at any of the magic elements, and everyone should be able to learn every spell...but when you look at how things actually work, the spells people use are based on their talents, right? I know there are even some factions now that are focused on specific elements..."

"That all just comes down to personal preference, I'm pretty sure. For example, I can use spells of every element, but the ones I actually prefer, and the ones I use the most, are composite spells—and usually ones with lightning as their main element, specifically. Depending on the situation, I'll use other spells as well, but...yeah, essentially, it's a matter of people going all out with learning the kinds of spells they like, and then not taking other kinds of spells seriously. Or in other words, it's up to the individual."

Indeed, there were a number of students at the academy who heavily relied on the sort of magic they excelled at, and refused to learn any other magic whatsoever.

Zweit found this answer reasonable.

"So they *can* learn it; they just haven't bothered to master it, right? Still, there's a limit to how many formulas you can store in your subconscious. So how are you meant to increase the number of spells you can learn?"

"The main problem with that limit is that people make their formulas too big. If you cut down on waste and make your formulas smaller and more intricate, the actual sigils you store away in your subconscious will be smaller as well—and the more compact you can get them, the more you'll be able to store. Get good enough at that, and you'll be able to learn plenty of other spells. Essentially, a mage's ability to understand magic formulas and make good use of that understanding is what really lets them show what they're made of."

"One spell my faction's working on now has a sigil about the size of a small colosseum, so...they sure are wasting a lot of space, then."

"A colosseum? What, are they researching annihilation magic or something?"

Well, I guess that's what you get if you only use two-dimensional sigils. Not to mention, it's going to end up needing a huge amount of mana, and it'll probably be useless as a result, so..."

"Why do you sound so confident when you haven't even seen it...?"

"It's a path that every mage goes down at some point, after all. The more powerful the spell, the more complex its formula becomes, so it's easy to tell. But a mage's *real* skill lies in their ability to make those formulas smaller."

The latest magic being researched was about how Zweit had described it. But Zelos's magic formulas were an entirely different kind of thing—like nothing he'd seen before—with a three-dimensional structure. Magic letters rotated around to form something like an unintelligible puzzle.

At the very least, it was a hundred years ahead of the conventional sigils based on the fifty-six magic letters. And being able to learn from the mage who'd made it was causing an indescribable feeling of superiority to well up inside Zweit.

"‘A path every mage goes down,’ huh? And how much further along that path are *you*, compared to them?"

"Who knows? I don't intend to compare my own magic research with anyone else's. I'm not interested, for starters, and I don't plan on teaching anyone what I've found."

"So you're saying anyone who wants to catch up to you is going to have to make it there by themselves? That sounds like a lot..."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. What I've figured out, I've figured out through my own blood, sweat, and tears. Why should I have to just hand it over to other people? Even if I *did* want to teach it to someone, I'd have no way of knowing what they'd use it for; it'd be too dangerous. Especially if we're talking about the sort of spells that can turn a huge area into a barren wasteland."

"So you're only teaching us the basics, then? Still, what are you going to do if we use that to make our *own* crazy spells? You can do that even with the fifty-six magic letters, right? It sounds like you'd need a super dense magic formula, but still..."

“I can’t be responsible for everything. And I mean, even if someone *did* find out the results of my research, they wouldn’t be able to actually use it. There’d be no point in handing it over, even if I wanted to.”

Zweit could practically feel electricity running down his spine.

That kept happening during these classes—and it wasn’t fear, but rather something close to a surge of excitement.

Effectively, Zelos was saying that the spells he’d made were just for himself; nobody else would be able to use them. Even if anyone else *did* somehow get a hold of them, it wouldn’t do them any good—the spells would just be uselessly taking up space in their mind.

It showed just how far the Great Sage had come—and now, here he was, teaching Zweit about what lay at the heart of magic. The thought had the young man feeling an indescribable sense of joy.

“You two are young, after all. The best thing you can do for now is improve yourselves through your own efforts, starting from the basics. If you get carried away and think you’re unstoppable just because you’ve learned some things from someone else, you’ll end up stagnating—I want you to remember that.”

“So, what, you want us to make our own spells for ourselves, is that it? Jeez...what kind of crazy teacher would even *ask* for that?”

“As long as you know the basics and put everything you’ve got into making sure you apply them right, it’s simple. The rest will just come down to how much hard work you put in and how long you keep it up. You should always question common sense. Fight against your own mind. Keep up the cycle of theory and practice. The life of a mage is a life of solitude, my students...” Zelos puffed out his chest as he spoke.

“Are you...trying to look cool?”

In these last few days, Zweit had come to realize just how far behind Zelos the mages from the Magic Kingdom of Solistia really were.

Meeting the Great Sage had made him keenly aware that all of the country’s mages sorely misunderstood how magic worked. The meaning of the magic letters, methods for deciphering them, the creation of sigils, the use of your

own internal mana and nature's external mana, and how to manage and apply all that knowledge... All of these were things Zweit had never known before.

Combine that with things like the proper frame of mind for fighting—not to mention techniques to use in close-quarters combat—and the overwhelming gap in competency only became clearer.

“Anyway...‘simple,’ huh? So do you think I’d be able to do it as well?”

“I do, yes. Well, it’ll all come down to your own efforts, and to how well you can understand the way the world works. You probably want to at least get a good handle on the laws of physics. They’re an important part of the basics, so you’d do well to learn them.”

“The laws of physics, huh? This is all starting to sound pretty interesting. Honestly, this is the first time I’ve felt so excited...just how crap *were* those teachers I had before?”

“Perhaps, Brother, it wasn’t just that our teachers were bad, but that the mages who taught *them* misunderstood things as well. As you know, most of the world’s literature on magic was lost in the Dark God War, so I’m not sure people would have any way of knowing that their research is wrong. Unlike us, they didn’t have a real expert to point all that out to them; they probably just had to grope around in the dark for answers.”

While he was rough around the edges, Zweit was sincere in his attitude toward magic.

What he didn’t know already, he wanted to learn. And what he *did* know already, he wanted to build on further—see what lay beyond.

He was therefore taking these classes seriously and starting to test things out in his own way.

Before him stood a mage who had worked his way to incredible heights, and yet continued with his research nonetheless, still not satisfied with all he had already achieved. It was only natural, then, that any proper mage who saw that would want to emulate it and reach those same heights themselves.

“All right, then; I think we’ve gone on long enough for today. We’ll pick up where we left off tomorrow.”

“Oh? Already? That felt rather fast...” Celestina sounded a bit disappointed.

“You say that, but we’ve been going for about three hours now, you know? If you try to cram in too much without taking a break, you won’t learn it all properly. And it’s important to get some rest every now and then.”

“That’s unfortunate. I’m looking forward to tomorrow, though.”

“I’ll be having the two of you try your hand at layered sigils soon, by the way. It’s pretty simple stuff, so it’s nothing to get too worked up about; just have fun with it.”

And so the day’s class came to a close.

Even after Zelos left the room, Celestina stayed behind, making sure to revise what she’d learned. It came as quite the surprise to Zweit.

After all, this was the same girl who had always tried her best to avoid him...

“Hey, Celestina...”

“What is it, Brother?”

“You’ve really changed. You would’ve usually run away from me the second you got the chance, right?”

“Well...yes. But now *I* can use magic as well—and while I’m nowhere near as good as Master, I can decipher magic formulas well enough to get a basic idea of how they work. Maybe I *have* changed. Not that I’ve really thought much about it...”

“He sure is something, huh? And yeah, it’s obvious that you’re different now. I can tell.”

As far as Zweit and Celestina saw it, no other mage could come close to Zelos’s caliber.

Having the opportunity to be taught by such an amazing mage felt like an incredible honor for the two of them, who were still only fledgling mages themselves.

He was teaching them about the creation of magic formulas—the very fundamentals of magic. And not only did he have a completely different

perspective from that of the teachers at the academy, he was able to back it up.

“I’m barely even a small fry compared to him. Why the hell did I try to pick a fight with him?! Well, I guess it *did* end up giving me the chance to ask a Sage for teaching, which is...pretty much the highest honor you can get as a mage. Must be nice being you—being his apprentice and all...”

“Aren’t you going to become his apprentice as well? You’re already taking his classes, aren’t you?”

“Well, I’ve got my faction to worry about... I don’t think I’d be able to become his formal apprentice. Fuck me—I should never have joined up with those pricks in the first place!”

The modern-day Wiesler faction placed a strong emphasis on political power, considering actual magic and combat research to be of secondary importance.

And being surrounded by people like that for so long had polluted Zweit’s mind.

Being exalted by the people around him had made him arrogant—leading to his recent train wreck of an unrequited love. It was almost as if he’d been brainwashed. In fact, he was starting to wonder whether he really *had* been brainwashed.

After all, reflecting on his actions over the past couple of years made him realize that he’d done all sorts of things he couldn’t quite explain.

If something like that *had* happened to him—and if he had, somehow, managed to snap out of it recently—then it would explain the unusual sense of clarity that he’d been feeling as of late. Regardless, the experience made him feel like he had to say something.

“Let me warn you: when you go back to the academy, watch out for anyone related to the factions. They’ll absolutely try and pull you into their camp.”

“You’re...looking out for me? That’s rare. In fact, I think this is a first, isn’t it?”

“I’m not an idiot, okay? You’ve changed, and I can tell. You can use magic now, *and* you can decipher magic letters. You’re at least good enough that there’s no way those bastards from the factions would leave you alone...”

“That *does* sound like a bother. I don’t feel like there’s any point to the factions even existing...”

“You’re damn right about that. Now that I know a Great Sage, I can see that *their* classes are sloppy at best. They’ve got *everything* wrong! Right from the basics!”

For both Celestina and Zweit, these last few days had been very busy—but even more than that, they’d been rewarding.

Both of them had suddenly found their capacity for learning growing by leaps and bounds, as if a machine that had long since ground to a halt had finally started to move again.

The more they came to know about magic, the more interesting it seemed—and even though they were only on the basics, they were making all sorts of new discoveries. Above all, things they’d been uncertain about had suddenly become clear, opening their eyes to new possibilities. It was all incredibly exciting.

“I don’t even *want* to go back to the damn academy! I’d be able to learn so much more if I just stayed here...”

“You’re right. But we *will* have to go back in another month or so, won’t we...?”

Zelos had agreed to be their tutor for a two-month period.

In about one more month, Zweit and Celestina would need to go back to the academy. Back to those same old dull lectures.

Both of them felt like it was going to be a huge waste of time.

“By the way, is Brother Croesus not returning?”

“*Him?* He might end up as the leader of the Saint-Germain faction, so all he’s doing is research. He just spends every day cooped up in that research building of theirs. Just doing pointless crap...”

“Pointless is the word, yes. He’s wasting precious time.”

“That prick—you know what he said last time I saw him? ‘You’re going back home? Give Father my regards, then. Surely you can at least do that? You *are*

my brother, after all...' He just treated me like a damn messenger pigeon!"

"Same as always, then... He must really enjoy his research."

Delthasis's second son, Croesus, had no interest in anything but his research, and even saw interacting with other people as a waste of time. Uninterested in others, he prioritized efficiency above all else—a devotion to his research that, if nothing else, seemed befitting of a mage.

Still, Zweit was sick of his behavior.

"He sure *is* the same as always, the stuck-up asshole. But I guess he's out of luck..." Zweit let out a smug laugh.

"Ah. I suppose you're right. To think that he's the only one of us to miss out on getting taught by a Great Sage..."

"Right? I'm looking forward to seeing his face when he finds out."

Zweit and Croesus were like fire and ice. Their personalities were complete opposites, and both believed they were completely incompatible with each other. Perhaps they could've overcome their differences with a heart-to-heart—but that wasn't something they'd ever done.

"I mean, I *do* have to admit that he comes across as a real mage. Everything lately's got me thinking about stuff, you know..."

"His behavior *does* resemble Master's in a way. But not only is his knowledge lacking, it's also *wrong*..."

"Yeah, that's what's unfortunate. For him, mind you—it's good news for me. Huh. Now that I think of it, maybe *that's* why I didn't like Zelos the first time I met him. Because he reminds me of Croesus..."

"Do you really hate Brother Croesus that much?"

"I *despise* him! He doesn't even take the time to *look* at me; heck, he doesn't give a shit about *anything* around him! I swear, I'm going to sink my fist right into that smug face of his one day..."

Zweit was at odds with Croesus because of their contrasting personalities, but he wasn't aware that their feud was fueling the dispute over who would become the next duke. It wasn't as if he held any real enmity toward his

brother; he just quite simply *didn't like* the guy, and the two of them had never tried to get closer to each other.

Zweit was, after all, a mage at heart. He wasn't particularly interested in snide gossip about other people.

Celestina, meanwhile, could do nothing but sigh over the situation between her two brothers.

All she wanted was for things not to end up in a civil war.

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A day had passed, and Zelos sat in a waiting room for customers.

He'd been called there by Creston—who, as always, was rather too infatuated with his granddaughter.

The old man cackled with glee. "Finally! Finally, Celestina's armor has been finished!"

"You sure are in high spirits today. And if it's finished, where is it?"

"I was so overjoyed that I gave it right to her, lickety-split. She should be back any second now..."

The old man was uncharacteristically excited, practically bouncing with energy as he waited for his granddaughter to come back wearing her new equipment.

And as often happened when he got carried away, Zelos couldn't stop himself from throwing a quip in his direction.

"You're *already* making her try it on? *Someone's* eager."

"I could hardly make her wear such shoddy armor forever! Besides, this is the first time I've had any armor made for her. Oh, I just *know* it will look perfect on her..."

Zelos paused for a moment before asking: "What about your *other* grandchild?"

"Oh, he's got some armor we made for him a while ago. Does he really need more? Equipment for men is all crude and ugly anyway."

“You know, you’re such a terrible grandfather it’s almost refreshing. I feel sorry for poor Zweit...”

Creston’s abundance of love for his granddaughter contrasted with his treatment of his grandson; he had some real favoritism going on. Zweit would hardly have been happy to hear it.

“I used a good amount of my allowance for this, you know! I wanted to make sure everything was perfect, right from the raw materials. She deserves the very best armor money can buy, after all...”

“I’m kind of curious to hear exactly *what* materials you used. I mean, I can at least guess they would’ve been ridiculously expensive, whatever they were...”

“Of *course* they were expensive! Why, if it were for the sake of my adorable granddaughter, I would sell a soul to a demon! Oh—not my *own* soul, mind you...”

“Again, you’re such a scumbag it’s almost refreshing.”

Creston was saying some absurd things. And what made it even worse was that he meant what he was saying.

In all likelihood, he probably *would* sacrifice someone’s life to a demon if it helped his granddaughter in any way.

The man loved his granddaughter enough to do some truly evil things for her sake.

“She’ll probably end up marrying some guy one day—you know that, right? What are you going to do when that happens?”

“I’ll never allow it! *Never*, I tell you! How could I ever hand over my precious girl to some boorish nobody?!”

“In that case, what if that ‘precious girl’ of yours ends up missing her chance to get married?”

“In that case, then...hmm. I suppose I could have her marry *you*, Zelos. Rest assured, polygamy is perfectly acceptable for male mages in this country! As is the reverse, on occasion.”

“Don’t just casually bring me into this!”

Creston was coming out with some absurd ideas, as he was wont to do.

“Why, if I could see the face of my great-grandchild someday, I would die happy, *wherever* I was headed after that. Even if that place were hell...”

“I can just see you using some guy for his genes and then killing him off after the fact. But you *do* realize someone would probably try and kill you for revenge if you did that, though...right?”

“Of *course* I would have him killed! Any man who would lay his hands on my granddaughter should be prepared to pay the price!”

“You really are a rotten old fart!”

Creston was a real demon of an old man when it came to his granddaughter. And as someone who’d been caught up in his parade, Zelos was struggling to deal with him. The man was outrageous.

The more he had to put up with the old noble, the less he found himself unable to hold back his quips.

Their discussion was interrupted when a door off to one side opened—and out came Celestina, clad in her brand-new armor. She was wearing a white dress topped with a gleaming steel breastplate, and she held a matching shield in one hand. In her other hand was a mace, which was decorated in a simple but tasteful manner.

Indeed, from her gauntlets to her boots, her whole set of equipment was gilded, albeit in a classy way—not too garish. It gave the impression of a soldier being sent off to war in a big parade.

“Um...Grandfather? I’m going to be doing combat training, yes? Against monsters? Th-This is...”

“Hmm, let’s see. An armored dress made by combining mithril fiber with arachne thread; a scaled breastplate made of mithril and scales from the white snake dragon; gauntlets and boots made from the same stuff again; then the mace has orichalcum mixed in as well, so she’ll be able to use it in place of a wand... Tell me, Creston—how much did you spend on all this?”

“Wh-What are you talking about? It wasn’t *that* much of a hefty sum...”

“This armor’s practically a treasure! And you clearly made it to suit all your own tastes...”

“Huh? *What?! Was it really that expensive?!?*”

Creston was feigning innocence, but he wouldn’t be able to fool Zelos’s appraising eye.

Zelos could tell this equipment had cost enough to run a whole territory for a year. It was hardly something you’d be able to afford with a noble’s allowance alone.

“Creston... You haven’t been embezzling tax money for this, have you?”

“How rude! I used my own money. And...I may have sold a couple of little things from our treasury.”

“Did you, now? Did you get permission from the duke? I feel like this is the sort of thing you’d need to go through the official processes for, right?”

Creston turned away in an almost exaggerated fashion.

In other words, he *hadn’t* gotten permission—and since he was now retired, no longer the duke, that *did* amount to embezzlement of a kind. It seemed the old man had decided to dip his toes into crime for the sake of his granddaughter.

“What’s the fuss? Delthasis had the gall to refuse me when I requested he send seven army divisions as guards. Surely he wouldn’t dare complain about me using up some pocket change to protect his daughter, hmm?”

“The number of guards you asked for keeps going up every time you mention it! And not only did you embezzle from him—you don’t even seem remorseful!”

“I made sure to only take items I received myself when I was younger! I haven’t fallen *that* far, I’ll have you know!”

“You should’ve at least gone through the proper procedures. If you get stung for what you’ve done, your granddaughter’s going to get brought into it as well, you know!”

“*Ngh!* Drat. I must admit I hadn’t thought that far ahead...”

“You’re too careless. Just how much were you losing your mind over this?”

The old man’s behavior had gotten entirely out of hand. Whatever his reasons, the fact remained that nobles needed to go through due process to take out treasury funds. If they didn’t, they could be done in for embezzlement, noble or not.

Yet old Creston had completely skipped over that whole step.

“Mmm... This can’t be good. I suppose at this point I’ll need to go back to that miser Del and bow my head before him...”

“Grandfather... Whatever you say, you’ve gone too far.”

“The fact that you’re saying, ‘I suppose at this point,’ means you’re *still* not remorseful. I guess it’s nothing rare for a *mage* to be selfish, but you’re a noble as well, and selfish is about the worst thing a noble can be...”

“Indeed. Truly, Father, you bring me to my wit’s end. I’m flabbergasted. Lost for words.”

“Who’s this?”

“Gah. Delthasis.”

“Father...”

Zelos, Creston, and Celestina turned around all at once. Their gaze was met by a well-dressed gentleman of about the same age as Zelos.

Going by what everyone had just said, Zelos figured he had to be Celestina and Zweit’s father.

“This is my first time meeting a Great Sage. I’ve heard stories of you from my father. My name is Delthasis; I am the father of Celestina and Zweit, the son of the troublesome old man beside you, and the current duke of this territory. It seems my family has been causing you quite the bother. Especially the eldest of us...”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Zelos Merlin, just a humble mage. Please, don’t feel the need to call me ‘Great Sage.’ Anyway, it seems like you must have a lot on your plate as a duke...”

“That I do. My excuse for a father seems to have picked the lock of our treasury, taken some of its artifacts, and sold them off for money. Not to mention disposed of the evidence and made himself an alibi. If only you *knew* how much this has all set back my work...”

“Creston...what are you *doing*, man?!”

The former duke was sweating buckets.

Delthasis, meanwhile, was glaring at the old thief with cold eyes.

“H-How did you find out? I was sure I left no evidence...”

“Your alibi backfired. Not only could you not have been where you said you were, given the time, the distance you would’ve had to cover made me suspicious as well. Then it was just a matter of carrying out a thorough investigation, and it all became clear. To think you’d even prepared fakes as replacements... I received a confession from someone who said you bought their services.”

“Gah! I *knew* I should’ve said I was somewhere closer than that tavern... And that cretin! Selling me out now, are you?”

“Is that all you have to say for yourself? Your little adventure prompted the treasury guard to attempt suicide, you know! I expect you to take responsibility.”

“As if I should care about what happens to some lowly guard!”

Creston continued to show no sign of remorse. Worse, he was acting completely indifferent, as if what he had done was only natural.

In short, he was being utterly defiant.

Delthasis sighed. “Well, I suppose my own history of playing around is to blame, in a sense. I can only fault you so much. But could you not have at least gone through due process? That would’ve allowed us to avoid this whole uproar...”

“Certainly. Now that I think about it, I suppose your fondness for the fairer sex *would* have had something to do with the old man ending up how he has. Have you ever thought of putting a stop to that habit of yours?”

“I have not. Bringing happiness to women who harbor sadness in their hearts is my very mission as a man.”

“Well, you’re certainly open about it, at least. Like father, like son, I suppose; two peas in a pod.”

“Grandfather, you really didn’t have to go that far...”

In Celestina’s eyes, Creston’s actions had led a person to attempt suicide.

And it was all because her grandfather had tried to do something for *her*.

“You see, Father? Celestina is feeling hurt. Because of *your* rash behavior...”

Creston grimaced at the thought. “I...suppose I may indeed have gone too far. That said—I hear the treasury guard has been worrying about his wife cheating with a young man, you know? Despite the fact they were married barely half a year ago...”

“We are talking about *your* scandalous behavior. Whatever else may have caused the man to attempt suicide is not the issue. Which is why, Father, I expect you to settle the matter. *I* am not about to do it. You can clean up after your own stupidity.”

“I suppose I shall...if I must. *Tch.*”

“The geezer’s still got the gall to click his tongue? And he clearly doesn’t want to make up for what he’s done...”

Zelos’s words toward Creston were growing even harsher. He was flat-out calling him a “geezer” now.

It seemed like he no longer had any intention of holding back against the old man.

“By the way, Mr. Delthasis, what exactly did your father sell off?”

“Two magic stones. *Wyvern* magic stones. Each a valuable treasure, about the size of a palm. I imagine it would be nigh impossible to acquire their like again. They were precious gifts from royalty...”

“Wyvern magic stones, was it? You know, I actually have some myself...”

“What?! Please, do let us have them. Even *I* would not be eager to see my

own father executed.”

“Hmm...that’s fine, but you owe me one, okay, Creston?”

“Grrr...fine. I’ll take you up on your offer.”

If he’d taken the proper steps, things wouldn’t have ended up like this in the first place. Yet Creston was still being obstinate. As always, he became rather combative when his granddaughter was involved.

Letting out a sigh, Zelos opened up his inventory, brought out three wyvern magic stones, and handed them over to Delthasis. The three nobles’ expressions changed in an instant.

“Wha—?! The sheer *size* of these stones... These are twice as large as those we had in storage!”

“Hmm... I suppose it makes sense, coming from the Far-Flung Green Depths, but to think that magic stones like these could exist...”

“I-I heard that you’d defeated wyverns, Master, but wyverns with magic stones as large as these must have been...”

“I got them for free, so please don’t hold back. I’ve got another four or so anyway, and your family *has* been giving me a place to stay.”

The whole family was speechless.

Zelos was implying that he’d faced a full seven wyverns head-on, and not only survived but actually *defeated* them.

They were, by nature, the sort of creature to hunt in packs; it was highly unlikely to find just one of them. They were dangerous enough that any battle with them would leave most mercenary groups with tremendous casualties.

So it was apparent that the singular mage standing before them had enough firepower to at least rival such a force.

“I am in your debt, Great Sage. I will make sure to compensate you—and to have my fool of a father do the same...”

“I don’t need any social status or honors or anything; I’d just like a plot of land. One with enough space to do some farming.”

“Ah...that’s right. There *was* that matter, wasn’t there? I must admit it slipped my mind amid all that’s been going on...”

“And you call *me* a fool, Delthasis!”

“Whose fault do you think it is, you wretch of a father?!”

Creston had, indeed, been the culprit behind Delthasis’s busy schedule.

“There are still some preparations to be completed, but I *will* meet your request—for your help today, and as thanks for saving my daughter and my fool of a father. I will see to it that we carve out part of our secondary estate and bestow it upon you for your own use. You will also be provided with a house.”

“Thank you. Finally... Finally, I’ll be able to put an end to my days of being homeless...”

“Would it not be more convenient to give him land out the back of that—what were they calling it now—‘Church of Screams’? The area around there is my territory as well, and you’d be able to live a quiet life there. How about it?”

“As long as I get a house, I’m not going to fuss over every little detail. I’m essentially homeless, unemployed, and scruffy-looking to boot, so—wait, the ‘Church of Screams’? What’s *that* meant to be?!”

“Have you not heard? Word has been going around lately calling it a nightmarish church; a place where the air is filled with the sound of screams. Anyway, I will organize a house for you once I return to my home.”

Zelos had no idea that the orphanage had earned itself such an unflattering nickname.

Not to mention, the rumor had apparently made its way all the way to the duke. It looked like the place’s mandrake-farming had gotten it quite the reputation—and a bad one, at that.

One way or another, it seemed like Delthasis was a surprisingly reasonable duke. If only he weren’t such a philanderer, he might even have been a *good* one...but it seemed like he had no intention of putting a stop to that particular habit.

His business concluded, Delthasis turned on his heel and moved to exit the

room.

“Well, Father, I still have work to do, so I’ll be returning. Please do avoid causing any *further* trouble.”

“Yes, yes. I admit I went a tad too far on this occasion. *Tch.*” He muttered, “I’ll have to make absolutely sure I don’t leave any evidence next time...”

“The geezer hasn’t learned a thing, has he?” Zelos and Delthasis were in agreement.

Zelos’s meeting with the duke had been short—and a coincidence at that.

But one way or another, it seemed like he’d finally be getting the plot of land he’d been waiting for.

A plot of land that would wind up becoming his future base of operations...though that was still a ways in the future.

“By the way, I haven’t seen Zweit around. What’s he doing about now?”

“Hmm? Now that you mention it, I *do* suppose I haven’t seen the boy today.”

“Brother’s probably preparing for his next lesson. Or so I imagine.”

“Oh. I didn’t notice. Granted, I wasn’t particularly interested in looking for him.”

Poor Zweit had been forgotten again.

As for what he was doing at the time...

“Ha ha! I get it! Okay—so *this* is how you decipher magic formulas! This is the most fun I’ve had in a while!”

He was having quite a good time practicing deciphering magic formulas.

Whatever you could say about his attitude, he was both talented and earnest as a mage.

Three days remained until he and Celestina were set to head off to the Far-Flung Green Depths. It was almost time for them to experience combat training in the form of a boot camp—a boot camp held in a vast forest crawling with monsters.

Chapter 13: The Old Guy Joins His Students on a Dangerous Journey

It was a lively morning at the second residence of the Solistia ducal family.

The place was bustling with knights, all clad in full armor and wearing swords at their hips; in fact, perhaps “imposing” was the better term than “lively.” Either way, all of the knights wore solemn expressions, clearly nervous about where they were headed.

They were fifteen in number, and they had been tasked with guarding the duke’s daughter and one of his sons.

It was Creston, the former duke, who had arranged for these guards. Officially, at least, they were there to guard his beloved granddaughter; in reality, Creston’s plan was more for them to protect her by offering themselves up as monster food.

“Fifteen knights, huh...? Wouldn’t that just about classify as a squad?”

“Pathetic, is it not?! To think that that wretch Delthasis would only send me such a paltry number...”

“No, no, I think this is *more* than enough! Just how many people are you intending on sacrificing?!”

While the knights had come along as guards, most of them were on the younger side, so the mission would also serve to give them some real combat experience of their own.

There wasn’t a single mage among their ranks—a further sign of the bad blood between the Order of Knights and the Order of Mages.

The Order of Mages certainly did not intend to send any of its mages out on *escort missions*.

“Curse that head of the Order of Mages... I’ll be lodging a complaint about him, you can rest assured. What good are mages that never experience a real

battle?”

“I don’t disagree, Creston, but I feel like you’ve got a bit of a different aim in mind...”

He was, of course, talking about the old man’s “aim” of bringing along more bodies to serve as Celestina’s meat shields.

The Solistia ducal family had always been relatives of the royalty—and the Solistia faction of mages, which Creston had created himself, was on good terms with the Order of Knights. This didn’t sit well with the other, larger factions.

“You have your own faction too, don’t you, Creston? Couldn’t you have called in some mages from that? I feel like it’d be the perfect opportunity to get them some experience.”

“Mmm. Unfortunately, you see, they lack the skills for even this sort of combat training. All of them are crafters by trade; if there were any fighters among their ranks, I’d have sent them along in a flash, but alas. I did ask them all just in case, but unfortunately they all declined.”

“Ah.”

Zelos gave a noncommittal response, but inside, he was wondering: *Maybe they turned you down because they know you’re so crazy about your granddaughter you’d try and feed them to monsters to protect her?* He tried not to voice that thought, however.

He was already aware that saying it wouldn’t accomplish anything.

As Zelos and Creston talked, the knights in front of them were loading luggage onto a number of horse-drawn carriages, steadily preparing to depart. Beyond the obvious inclusion of food, they were bringing a number of other important necessities, like tents and cookware. They’d have enough to last for about a week of combat training.

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“We’re almost ready to depart, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. I leave my grandchildren in your hands.”

“I promise you, we will protect them at all costs.”

“Good. I have high expectations of you.”

As the knight bowed before Creston, he took a glance at Zelos—and immediately felt that something was off about the man. Every mage he knew played a role akin to artillery, shooting off spells from the back of a fight. They never joined the front lines to provide support, let alone to join the melee themselves. Yet despite that, they carried themselves as if they were better than everybody else; in short, they were a truly unpleasant bunch.

The mage who stood before him, however, gave off the impression of a man more like himself and the other knights. And a second, better look was enough to reveal why.

“Are those...swords? *Two* of them? You... You *are* a mage, yes?”

“Even mages need to be able to fight back from close quarters. If we can’t, we just end up dying on the battlefield, you know.”

That answer was enough to let the knight know this much: the mage before him was a tough fighter who’d seen countless battles. Someone who understood the importance of close-quarters combat. He seemed to be completely different from the mages from this country, and it opened the knight’s eyes to a wider world.

“‘On the battlefield,’ you say... Are you really a mage? I’ve never met one who actually understands the importance of fighting up close and personal...”

“Of *course* it’s important! What good is a mage who turns useless the moment they run out of mana? If you can’t at least protect yourself, you’ll end up dead before long.”

The knight was starting to realize that the person in front of him was no ordinary man.

He’d clearly made it through enough battles to state with confidence what led to death on the battlefield, and his use of both magic *and* swordsmanship made him a clear outlier. Even just the aura emanating from the man made it clear he was quite the capable fighter.

“It sure sounds like mages wherever you’re from have their heads screwed on straight. I wish I could make the mages *here* listen to what you’re saying. They don’t even *train* for close-quarters combat.”

“Most mages like that are going to die the moment things get tough—and those who do make it through are only going to claw their way into positions of power and repeat the cycle. Even if I *did* try to teach every mage in the country the importance of being able to fight up close, the senior ones would just end up sabotaging anyone who tried to take me seriously, wouldn’t they? It’s a sad state of things...”

“That’s what gives me a headache. As things stand, any mages who *do* want to get along with the Order of Knights have no choice but to contact us in secret. After all, they’d be treated as traitors if the other mages found out, from what I hear...”

“Yeah, that definitely sounds like a pain. I mean, knights are an army’s sword and shield. *They’re* the ones putting their lives on the line to stop the enemy’s advance and strike them down. Mages are meant to support the knights, improve their odds of survival, and work behind the scenes to turn the battlefield in their favor. What good could come out of having your knights and mages work *against* each other?”

“I *wish* things worked like that here, but unfortunately, that’s not the case. The knights and the mages operate separately. As embarrassing as it is to admit...”

“Yes, I’ve heard from Creston. Who thought it’d be a good idea to give mages political power? If you ask me, mages should be more like researchers, always looking for ways to improve our magic.”

A strange sense of camaraderie had formed between Zelos and the knight.

“Apologies for being so slow to introduce myself, by the way. I’m Aleph Gilbert, squad captain.”

“Pleasure to meet you. I’m Zelos Merlin—just a man trying to find out how the world works.”

The pair shook hands.

“Zelos here,” Creston chimed in, “is a truly excellent mage. In fact, he has been teaching my two grandchildren here what it really means to be one. He might even be able to teach you and your squad some things!”

“Oh? I *was* thinking he had a different vibe from the mages from around these parts; if he really is that impressive, then that would explain it. So he’s a master of both magic *and* the sword...?”

“Indeed—he has been putting my two grandchildren here through the wringer every day. Even going so far as to recreate real battles he’s been in.”

“That sounds excellent. So the two of them already know some ways of protecting themselves, then?”

“They still have a long way to go, but Zelos is doing a fine job of hammering the right mindset into them.”

What Creston meant was that Zweit and Celestina were being taught the importance of not only magic but also close-quarters combat.

The majority of mages had no fondness for that sort of fighting, and would retreat the moment they ran out of mana.

But in a real battle, there was no guarantee that things would be that easy.

In the worst-case scenario, you could end up in a battle that lasted for what felt like an eternity, during which you had to come to terms with the possibility of getting completely wiped out.

“I suppose people with proper combat experience really are different. You seem to have a good handle on how things actually work out there.”

“You’re overestimating me. Trust me, I’ve been on the brink of death so many times I’ve lost count—all because of my own shortcomings, mind you. I just think older people like myself have the responsibility of conveying our experience to others where we can. Actually doing that *well* is the hard part, though. I’ve never really taught anyone before...”

“It *is* hard trying to pass down your experiences to other people, isn’t it? But the fact that you’re even trying means you’re doing well. The head of the Order of Knights is always saying, ‘Mages these days are all rotten. There’s no way a

bunch like *that* would be able to survive on the battlefield.’ And I share his opinion.”

“The battlefield is practically alive; you can never quite be sure what it’s going to do. So yeah, I think it’s essential to have as many tools as you can for dealing with that. If nobody here’s even teaching that, then... What’s up with the lack of capable people in this country?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe it. It’s not just magic; wherever you look, there are useless sorts going around as if they own the place. If a war *were* to break out or something, they’d probably all just die the moment they stepped onto the battlefield.”

In other words, the mages here were incredibly naive about what their enemies could do.

They clung firmly to their baseless assumptions that they’d be safe as long as they stayed at the rear—and precisely *because* they’d never experienced real combat, they didn’t even understand how foolish they were being.

Having spent too long at peace, they’d forgotten just how cruel and repulsive battles could get.

The knights, who’d killed people in minor skirmishes and the like, at least understood that much. But the mages, who did nothing but fire off magic from the back, were involved so indirectly that they’d forgotten what it really meant to take another person’s life.

“So the years of peace have turned them into fools, huh...? You know, there’s a saying: ‘Don’t forget war in times of peace.’ I think it’s an important one to keep in mind...”

“You say some smart things. You’re exactly right—there’s just too much the mages around here don’t know about combat.”

Creston chimed in again. “Indeed, every last one of them lusts either for authority or for knowledge. It truly is a wretched state of things...”

The mages in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia were a bit of an extreme example, but wherever you went, peace was ultimately nothing but an illusion—conflict was never gone for good. Whether it was a minor scuffle, a feud between

villages, or a great war between continental states, it was only a matter of time before conflict came again. That was the unfortunate reality.

Humans of different nations had different cultures and customs. Throw religion into the mix, and there was even more tinder to spark the fires of conflict. That conflict could be set off by any little happening—and then spread in a flash, causing a war.

The only real question was whether that conflict would be minor or major; when you got down to it, the root causes were usually the same, a mire of differences with no “good guy” or “bad guy” to be seen. It was all terribly ambiguous, and wherever you went, you could expect it to be lying in wait.

Technically, mages were meant to be bastions of neutrality. But getting their hands on political power had transformed them into fools, and if you got dragged into any conflict yourself, you could count on them to be a royal nuisance.

“Well, we should just about be ready to go on our end. How are your grandchildren going with their preparations, Your Grace?”

“They *should* be almost ready as well, but...they certainly do seem to be taking their time, don’t they?”

“Personally, I don’t feel like I need to bring anything except the clothes on my back. I don’t know what’s taking them so long...”

It was then that the entrance doors behind the trio swung open—and out came the two grandchildren in question, each carrying a veritable mountain of luggage.

Celestina had with her a massive bag, which despite its size was packed to the brim. And Zweit toted a backpack enormous enough to make you wonder where exactly they even sold that sort of thing.

As heavy as both bags seemed, the siblings were trying their very best to carry them, muscles straining as they dragged them along.

“I-I think I’m ready now...”

“Did I...pack too much?” Zweit panted. “This thing’s heavy...”

Zelos, Aleph, and Creston responded as one: “Why’d you bring so much stuff?!”

It seemed like the bulk of Celestina’s luggage was spare clothes, while Zweit had packed an assortment of tools for conducting experiments. Aware that Zelos was capable of doing alchemy as well as magic, Zweit had bought himself all sorts of bits and bobs for alchemy, eager to give it a try—and as a result, his luggage had gotten very much out of hand. Zelos couldn’t help but see him as the spitting image of a peddler from some video game.

“Could you not have packed a little lighter?”

“You can’t expect a woman to go on a trip like this without spare clothes! I’m also bringing some books that interest me—I was thinking of going to the places they talk about and finding out whether what the books say is true or not...”

“You said the forest’s got some medicinal herbs too, right? I was thinking about trying out alchemy while I was there, so most of what I’ve packed are tools for mixing them together.”

Both of them were serious about this trip—and incredibly enthusiastic.

Zelos, in turn, couldn’t bring himself to snuff out that flame of enthusiasm. So he gave in and stored his students’ luggage inside his inventory.

Zweit’s curiosity was piqued. “Damn, that spell looks pretty useful! How’s it work?”

“I *wish* I knew; it’d be so much easier if I did. I can kind of make tools that do something similar, but magic tools made for storage can only hold so much. I don’t even know what kind of spell this *is*. Honestly, I don’t think I’d be able to make it myself.”

Celestina chimed in. “Oh, are you talking about item bags? They seem very convenient. I wish I had one. Still...are you really saying that there are spells even *you* don’t understand, Master?”

“Of course there are. I’m not a god or anything; if there *is* some omniscient, omnipotent being out there looking down at me, I must look like a piece of rubbish in their eyes.”

The truth was, Zelos's inventory was a power he'd received upon his reincarnation, when the gods from Earth had been forced to clean up the mess left by the goddesses of this world. There was no way a mere human could understand how it worked.

It was, in theory, possible to recreate a magic formula for the inventory system. But the amount of mana required to use it—and the vast size of the formula—would have made it almost impossible to control.

Zelos had actually tried, in secret, to create a spell that functioned as a simplified version of his inventory. But it had ended up being unusable, and he'd ultimately decided the whole system was an unintelligible bother of a thing that he wouldn't be able to understand through theory alone.

"Anyway," Zelos said, "we should be good to go. We'll be in your care for the next week or so."

"We could say the same. We'll be happy to have a reliable mage like yourself along for the trip."

While Aleph and Zelos exchanged pleasantries, Creston was giving his farewells behind them.

"Oh, Tina...*do* make sure to take care of yourself! If one of those brutish knights tries to lay his hands on you, you make sure to tell me. I'll make sure to *deal with him* properly..."

"Wh-What would you even do to him, Grandfather?!"

"Don't you worry about that. There are some things you're better off not knowing, my girl..."

"Grandfather?!"

Creston was on edge, clearly reluctant to part with his granddaughter.

I know it's a bit late to be saying this, but the guy's personality really does do a one-eighty when it comes to his granddaughter, huh? Honestly, it's probably bad enough to qualify as a mental illness or something...

Usually, Creston was an honorable man who cared for his people. But the instant Celestina got involved, he was liable to go berserk.

It was as if a switch got flipped, and he turned into a different person altogether. That was just how much he loved his granddaughter—but the symptoms of that love could put him in dangerous territory.

Zweit, in the meantime, was talking with the knights, discussing what they'd be doing when they reached the forest.

After all, the knights had been to the Far-Flung Green Depths before for their own training. They probably had an idea of what to expect.

And so the party set out, getting jostled about on their horse-drawn carriages as they headed east along the Far-Flung Highway.

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As their carriage made its way along, Zweit decided to ask Zelos something he'd been wondering about for a while now.

"Hey..."

"What is it, Zweit?"

"Why did someone as strong as you agree to be Celestina's personal tutor? I thought you hated being used by people in authority?"

"I sure do. What of it?"

"Grandfather's even going to be rewarding you with some land, right? Doesn't that go against your principles?"

Zelos looked up at the blue sky, his gaze distant.

"Zweit... Let's say you met a middle-aged man who was both homeless and unemployed. What would you think?"

"He'd be...pretty much a tramp, I guess?"

"Mmm hmm. Living like that, with nowhere to call home...it can't be good for a person, right? If you ask me, I think a healthy life is one in which you work hard and use whatever you earn to support a humble little lifestyle for yourself. So if someone tells me I can get some land for myself, and actually have my own place to live, of *course* I'll be happy to accept. It's sad having no home to go back to—you do agree, don't you?"

“I guess there’s more to you than I thought.”

“I don’t intend to work as a tool for the rich and powerful, but I think it should be perfectly okay for me to spend a bit of time guiding some promising youngsters, right? I always say, a quiet life’s a good life—and hopefully I can help you two realize just how happy that kind of life can be.”

“Right. Sorry. I was kind of thinking you might have had an ulterior motive or something.”

“Don’t worry about it. I know how shady I look, after all.”

Zelos had given an almost philosophical answer to Zweit’s question, but his actual reasoning went a little more like this:

C’mon, of course I want a house! I’m a shady-looking middle-aged dude in a country where I’ve got no connections and no reputation! I’m not going to have an easy time finding work. My magic’s too dangerous, and if I used my alchemy, I could see myself crashing the market for all sorts of stuff. Worst-case scenario, the state could end up sending some big group of nasty guys after me or something. There’s always brutal mercenary work, but...I don’t wanna do that!

At the ripe young age of forty, Zelos Merlin seemed to be feeling rather desperate.

He wanted to get married—to have a warm and welcoming household to come back to every night. And he was old enough now that he was starting to get in a bit of a hurry to make that a reality.

He was no longer at the age that he had plenty of time to spend exploring the world for fun.

All he wanted was to achieve his humble dream of starting a loving family in a little house and tending some fields.

*

After about two days of travel by carriage, the party reached the Saffron Plains, which bordered the Far-Flung Green Depths.

The knights were pitching tents, and Zelos was using earth magic to reinforce the perimeter with stone walls. The two siblings, meanwhile, were digging

ditches around those walls to set up pit traps.

About the only monsters that appeared in this area were herbivores and goblins. Very rarely, carnivorous monsters—predators—could appear as well, but they wouldn't be much of a problem, given the party's fighting strength.

If anything, the party had an *excess* of fighting strength. But given they were guarding two of the duke's children—including the assumed future duke—you could perhaps say that even that was on the low end of manpower.

The aim of this trip was to have said children build up combat experience, while at the same time serve as a training opportunity for the knights to raise their own levels. The only question was whether they would even find any suitable opponents before the end of the week they had planned...

Zelos heard Zweit calling out to him. "Hey, T-Teach... What are you doing there?"

"'Teach'? Is that me?"

"Yeah. I mean...you're my magic teacher as well, now. Regardless of how I feel, I should at least refer to you properly, right?"

"Honestly, I'm not fussed either way. Anyway, what's up?"

"I'm just wondering what you're doing. That's magic paper you've got there, yeah?"

Zelos had cut a blank sheet of magic paper lengthwise and begun to write magic letters onto it with a pen.

It was most likely an *arcana*—a magic talisman—and the magic letters he was writing were frighteningly detailed. It wasn't the kind of thing that modern-day mages would be able to decipher. Zweit had just happened to notice him doing it, and it had piqued the young man's interest.

"Oh, this? I was thinking of getting myself a familiar."

"A familiar? So that's a talisman, then? Are you planning to capture one of the monsters from around here or something?"

"No, there's no need to do anything like that. Well, just wait and see. It should be interesting."

Zweit hung around for a while and watched Zelos work.

The tip of Zelos's pen moved with confidence as he wrote out a magic formula Zweit had never seen before—and gradually, the arcana took shape. Its sigil, formed by countless magic letters, was an intricate work of art; it was impressive enough that Zweit couldn't help but let out a breath of astonishment.

What was more, Zelos obviously understood the *meaning* of all these magic letters, and he had used them to put together a spell that was entirely novel to Zweit.

Zweit, being a mage, was brimming with a desire to know what exactly this mysterious arcana would do.

"Well, that should about do it."

"Is it finished? More importantly, what's it meant to do?"

"Shall we give it a try? *Phantom eagle, spread your wings and be as my eyes.*"

As Zelos spoke a phrase to activate the magic, the arcana absorbed the mana in the area and manifested it into the form of an eagle.

This arcana didn't use magic to bind a living creature to your will and make it your familiar; rather, it created an artificial creature from scratch by using mana. Of course, since it was made from mana, that mana would eventually disperse, and the familiar would disappear. But it also meant that you didn't have to pay for your familiar's food or spend time looking after it.

It was a rather useful little tool for scouting, despite the inbuilt time limit.

"Wh-Whoa..."

"I guess it might be a bit closer to a golem than a familiar? It gathers up dust from around the area to form a body to use as a container, then encloses mana inside, so it's able to last for a decent while. You can use it for attacking too—see, just do this..."

Zelos gave a magic stone to the eagle, which took it with its beak and then swallowed it.

"What was *that*? Did you...did you feed it a magic stone? Oh, wait, I get it!

Giving it a magic stone helps it last longer, right?”

“Correct. There’s still a time limit, but by giving it a magic stone, you can make that limit longer. Convenient, hey?”

“That’s *gotta* be more useful than some crappy old familiar!”

“Not necessarily. It wouldn’t struggle against a goblin or anything, but if it came up against some kind of big monster, the result would depend on the caster’s level. If an inexperienced mage tried to use it, it wouldn’t be able to do all that much.”

“Huh. Is that how it works? Wait—it depends on the caster’s level? Then how strong is this one that *you* summoned?!”

“It should be able to defeat something like a wyvern without much difficulty. Now that you mention it, I might’ve made it a little *too* strong...”

Zelos’s magic was rather absurd, as always.

If Zweit, for example, were to use the arcana at his current level of 57 (he’d leveled up a bit since Zelos first appraised him), the familiar’s level would be 57 as well. And in terms of physical strength, it’d only be about as strong as a single high orc. But if summoned by Zelos, who boasted an incredibly high level, the same familiar would easily be above Level 1,000, and it’d be about on par with a particularly powerful dragon. It would also, of course, require a ridiculous amount of mana to create.

In simple terms, his familiar was stupendously strong.

“Th-That sounds amazing! I’ve never even *heard* of a familiar like that!”

“I mean, it *does* take a lot of mana. Anyway, though, enough about me. Want to give it a try? It’s pretty fun.”

“C-Can I really?”

“If you can’t make something as simple as this, you can hardly call yourself a mage. Feel free to copy mine as much as you want.”

“Woooooo! I’ll give it a try! I wanna do it now!”

Zweit, seventeen years of age, was giddy like a child.

At heart, he was a simpleminded boy. Behind him, Celestina shot him an envious look.

Naturally, Zelos made another arcana and gave it to her as well. And so...

“Jeez, this is great! It’s almost like I’m flying through the sky myself!”

“It really is! I never knew the world could look so vast...”

Zweit and Celestina had linked their familiars to their own senses and were getting some hands-on training with scouting, all of their own volition.

To the two of them, arcanas seemed like an unusual tool well worth learning about, and both were testing out their effectiveness while enjoying the view from above. In reality, their feet were still firmly planted on the ground—but what the familiars were seeing was being transmitted directly into their minds.

You could think of it like the first time you ever saw a 3D movie. The realism of it all had the two incredibly excited, and it was washing away the fatigue they’d built up over the past two days of travel.

As for what Zelos was doing, not far off to their side...

“Oh. There’s a group of orcs. And they’re close...”

He’d been *properly* scouting. And upon spotting the orcs, he cut the link to his familiar’s senses and headed over to see Aleph, the squad captain.

“Aleph!”

“What’s the matter, Mr. Zelos?”

The man who stood before Aleph was not Zelos the mage—the person he had spent the past two days with—but rather Zelos the *hunter*, a man who looked more like a ferocious beast preparing to stalk its prey. Zelos opened his inventory and took out a bow and quiver he’d borrowed from the Order of Knights. A devilish smile spread across his face.

“All right, everyone—the hunt is on!”

He was back in the wild. Back to the man he’d become during his harsh week of surviving in the forest...

It was the second coming of that insane, demonic warrior inside him—a mode

that the knights would later come to refer to as “the Zelos from back then.”

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The knights moved quickly.

Upon listening to reports from Zweit and Celestina, they got right into a battle formation, and planned to capitalize on the moment the orcs emerged from the forest. All the while, they continued to receive updates from the sky; they were perfectly prepared to make the first strike.

“They sure seem pretty cautious...”

“The orcs? Are they splitting up?”

“No. They’ve just stopped in their tracks.”

Thanks to their porcine nature, orcs had good noses. And unluckily for the party, they were upwind of the orcs, which had let the orcs sniff them out and know that there were people lying in wait. The orcs, in response, were just standing there without advancing any further, likely trying to get a better handle on the situation themselves.

“For pigs, they’ve sure got some wits about them,” said Zweit. “I guess they’ve got to be careful if they want to survive out here in the wild...”

Celestina added, “I suppose orcs must be smarter than I was giving them credit for. I’d heard they were somewhat intelligent, but I honestly didn’t think they’d be this formidable.”

“Waiting’s not really my style, but it’d be stupid to just rush in...” Aleph sighed.

“How about we drag *them* out to *us*, then? *Celestial Arrow of Judgment!*”

“What?!” cried three shocked voices.

Zelos gathered mana in his bow and used it to fire a shining arrow into the sky.

That single arrow split into countless other arrows in midair, coalescing dust from all around to send stone arrows raining down on the orcs at impressive speed. Zelos was careful to control his magic, though, so as not to *annihilate* the

orcs.

Having suddenly been exposed to his attack, the orcs came running straight out of the forest.

“Bows at the ready!”

The knights readied and drew their bows all at once, preparing to fire on a moment’s notice.

In their panic, the orcs didn’t even have an eye to spare for the knights. They were simply desperate to run away from the magic projectiles flying toward them.

The knights waited as long as they could, drawing the orcs close and holding out until they could let loose all at once and thin the enemy’s numbers.

And then...

“Release!”

A barrage of arrows went flying into the sky. The orcs hadn’t even noticed the trap in all the confusion—and the arrows tore through them, significantly reducing their numbers.

“Looks like that killed nine of them—and hurt another five pretty bad. I think we’ve got the numbers advantage now.”

“Knights, draw your swords!”

The sound of steel swords being drawn echoed across the plain.

“Charge!”

On their captain’s cue, the knights let out a fierce roar and charged toward the orcs.

Each knight was clad in full armor and held a shield.

The orcs swung with their own crude clubs, but the knights could simply block with their shields, making it difficult for the orcs to land any proper attacks from the front. The orcs also moved quite predictably—and they didn’t have any techniques devised for combat against *human* enemies. All of it meant that they would inevitably take some damage from the knights’ swords.

Plus, while the orcs might have excelled at brute-force attacks, their moves relied on a lot of large swings. As long as you could get in close, it was a piece of cake to swing a sword and take them down.

“Hi-yah!”

Celestina swung her mace, bringing it down hard on an orc’s head.

“And now...Air Cutter!”

The orc collapsed, sliced into pieces by a blade of air. Just like that, Celestina had managed to defeat one of the orcs.

Meanwhile, Zweit kept his foes in check with simple magic, then used his longsword to go in for the kill on a weakened orc.

“You’re slow! If this is really all you got? You’re *nothing* compared to those damn mud golems. This is too easy—it’s barely even a fight! Take this...

Fireball!”

Zweit’s and Celestina’s fighting styles were similar.



Both were using their weapons to beat back any enemies that got close, keeping them locked down with beginner-level magic when the opportunity arose, then going in for the finishing blow as soon as an enemy faltered.

The difference was that while Zweit was suited for the vanguard—charging straight toward his foe at the beginning of combat—Celestina carefully analyzed how her opponent was moving, and only went in for a powerful blow when the perfect opportunity revealed itself.

Essentially, Zweit was going for one-hit kills, while Celestina prioritized safety.

“Don’t let your guard down! This is a real fight! There’s no guarantee you’ll come out alive!”

But despite those words, the orcs didn’t stand a chance. The harsh training Zelos had been putting his students through day after day was paying off.

The pair of them even had enough composure to chat as they fought. And while they were inexperienced in group combat, they’d been doing some decent training in close-quarters combat more broadly. They’d gotten skilled enough that they had no problem at all adjusting to fighting as part of a larger group.

It showed their skill—as well as just how extreme Zelos’s training sessions had been.

“By the way, where’s Master?”

“Dunno. It’s just turned into a brawl now, so he’s probably killing some pigs somewhere around here, right?”

“I know he’ll be fine, but—Brother! Watch out!”

“Whoa!”

An orc who’d avoided taking damage from the barrage of magic attacks had raised its club overhead and come charging toward Zweit.

And then, all of a sudden, there was an arrow through its head. Unable to do anything, it simply collapsed.

“What just... Where’d that arrow come from?”

“Brother! Look! It’s Master! He’s up there!”

At some point, without anyone realizing, Zelos had made his way up a tree and started shooting at the orcs from above.

Whenever he felt like he needed to reposition, he’d shoot out wires from his arms, zipping about between the trees.

“He... He *is* a mage, right?”

“I’m sure of it, but he looks more like an assassin right now...”

“Crap! There’s another group of orcs headed this way! And there are...fifteen of them?!”

A separate group of orcs had just about descended on them.

Having also realized that himself, Zelos aimed his bow toward the new group and killed three orcs with a single shot.

Then he put the bow back away in his inventory and took out his Gruga Knife, which gleamed with a silver light.

The hunter jumped down onto the orcs. His face was devoid of any emotion; he was simply *working*, going about the hunt in a dispassionate manner.

*

Zelos and his companions had been known as the Destroyers. Their frightening power had come from not only the spells they had developed, but also their stealth—the way they would annihilate their enemies in the blink of an eye. They were practically monster-killing machines.

Before anyone could realize, they’d make their way right inside a pack of enemies, fire off wide-area annihilation magic to take out the small fries, then cut down the remnants in close-quarters combat without mercy.

Their style of fighting had been the complete opposite of what you’d expect from mages; it more resembled that of soldiers. Despite that, they’d actually been crafters at heart—not that most players had been aware.

“Finish off any injured orcs! Leave the healthy ones to Mr. Zelos!”

The knights let out another heroic roar.

Orcs had a lot of vitality. Their bodies were sturdy, and they were unyielding even by monster standards; they could be hard to finish off.

Zelos, however, boasted abnormal strength. He'd suddenly appeared from behind and cut off an orc's head, and he'd followed it up by throwing his knife right at his next target. It was far from the sort of combat you'd expect from a mage.

The melee continued until every last orc was dead. And as a result...

"Oh? My level's gone up!"

"Mine too!"

"That was a pretty tough fight!"

"Yeah, it was a hard start for our first day here. I just wanna rest now..."

The knights' levels had gone up dramatically. After all, it wasn't as if Zelos had killed all of the orcs. He'd simply thinned out their ranks, then tried his best to merely weaken the rest.

He had, of course, made sure to inflict status effects all over the place—a bit of poison here, a bit of paralysis over there. But he'd been careful to avoid actually killing the orcs himself wherever possible.

To the others, it might have looked as if he were simply mowing down the enemies. But he hadn't forgotten that they were there for the purposes of training.

"Mine's gone up as well. I'm Level 59 now..."

"And I'm Level 32..."

Having managed to level up on their first day here, Zweit and Celestina were both a little uneasy.

If this kept up for a whole week, it was hard to predict just what kind of people they'd be when they emerged.

Their teacher was, after all, Zelos—a man of extremes.

"Oh, no. Of all the things. Please, no..."

"What is it, Instructor? You're sounding weird all of a sudden. And...why are

you looking so pale?”

“It’s *him*. *He’s* here. A much more terrifying enemy...”

It seemed like Zelos couldn’t even hear Zweit. He was simply trembling in fear as he looked over the area through his familiar’s eyes.

“Mr. Zelos? Are you saying that there’s an enemy even *you* dread...and that it’s coming our way?”

You could almost feel the tension in the air.

Everyone there knew how powerful Zelos was—and in turn, they understood how dangerous a monster must be if it had him scared like that.

“He’s here. A truly dangerous enemy...albeit a different *kind* of danger. It’s... It’s a crazy ape!”

“Seriously?!” The whole party’s stunned voices rang out as one.

Sure, crazy apes could be formidable enemies—if you had to deal with a whole pack of them. But alone, they were weak, and it seemed like there was only *one* headed toward them. They had more than enough firepower to deal with it; it shouldn’t have been enough to leave Zelos petrified like that.

It was only natural, then, that everyone was confused. But Zelos’s next words would reveal to them to the true meaning behind his fear.

“They... I don’t know why, but they’re obsessed with going after guys’ asses. The last time I saw one, I barely escaped with my ass intact...”

You could hear the air freeze over. No—it was more like it was shattering.

“Wh-What are you...”

“S-So you’re saying that crazy—th-that it’s not just orcs that do that kind of thing?”

“We’re in danger! Specifically, our chastity...”

“To him, this is a harem. We’ve got to run.”

“You’re kidding! I heard this was going to be a dangerous journey, but I didn’t think it’d be dangerous like *this*...!”

That's when it appeared—a huge figure, just a touch under two meters tall, carpeted with white hair. It wore a slovenly expression, almost as if it were drunk. But a very particular part of it had turned into a terrifying beast: a vicious, magnificent tower was rising toward the sky.

The crazy ape cast its gaze over Zelos and the knights, as if it were ravishing them with its eyes. It let out a disturbing laugh. Everyone present felt a chill—no, more of a raging blizzard—run down their spine.

“R-Run awaaaaaay!” The same knights who had fought so valiantly against the orcs were now letting out a chorus of terror, their formation collapsing over the appearance of a single primate.

They ran straight ahead with all their might, without even daring to glance behind; they simply put every last ounce of energy they had into running that little bit faster.

Eventually, all of the knights just barely managed to get away without the men losing that which they valued most—though some of them had had their pants stripped in the process.

Once it was clear that everyone had gotten away safely, they embraced each other, crying tears of relief.

Such was the Far-Flung Green Depths: a forest of evil, crawling with monsters.

It was truly a dangerous place—and that danger could manifest in more ways than one.

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Having safely escaped the white ape, the party partook in a slightly early evening meal at their camp.

The knights sat in a ring around a bonfire in the middle of the camp, pouring warming soup into the bowls they were holding. The scent of herbs and spices had their mouths watering.

Zelos tore off a hunk of the hard bread he'd been given, soaked it in the soup, and felt a wave of emotion wash over him as he put it in his mouth.

“This is such luxury compared to when I first arrived in this world. The meat

actually has *flavor* to it this time...”

His words sounded almost melodic as he muttered the phrase, not talking to anyone in particular. He munched down on the meat—properly flavored now—and savored the taste.

Objectively speaking, it wasn’t exactly high cuisine. But as the crude, hearty taste spread throughout his mouth, the corners of his lips twitched into a tiny smile.

His mind went back to the week he’d spent surviving in the wilderness. All he’d had to eat was meat, and he’d had to get that meat by hunting; he hadn’t even had an easy source of water. Every day had been a slog as he trekked through the forest, getting attacked by all sorts of monsters as he went.

All he was doing now was eating run-of-the-mill cooking, but even that was more than enough to make him happy.

Zweit was reading a book—looking up tips about how to mix herbs—while some of the knights regaled each other with tales of their exploits and level-ups from the day’s battle. Others were calmly reflecting on the fight and what they could have done better.

The biggest standouts were the men who sat wearing pale expressions and hugging their knees...but it was probably best to leave them alone for the evening.

They’d been through quite the traumatic experience, after all.

“Well, then...the combat training’s only just gotten started. I wonder how they’ll all look a week from now?”

Unnoticed by all the others, Zelos wore a knowing smile.

Zelos had experienced the terrors of the Far-Flung Green Depths firsthand; he knew them well.

Even in this part of the forest, which was relatively safe, the monsters were fairly strong. It wasn’t the sort of place you could let your guard down. But at least for now, he decided, they had time to enjoy a hearty meal.

As a faint shade of red began to bleed into the horizon, the dangerous forest

grew ever darker.

The *true* danger, Zelos knew, was yet to come—but that could wait. He casually finished eating, took out a cigarette, and lit it with the Torch spell.

The faint trail of his cigarette smoke was swept away by the wind, disappearing into a night sky full of twinkling stars.

Extra Chapter: Iris Reincarnates

Sumika Irie was fourteen years old—just a run-of-the-mill student, attending a public middle school near her home.

Her father was middle management at a trading company, her mother had a part-time job at a neighborhood deli, and her younger brother was the ace of his junior-league baseball team. All in all, they were the very definition of an average family.

Sumika, however, didn't have many friends, and she didn't really talk much to the people around her. After all, she was aware that she didn't really fit in. She wasn't interested in celebrities or fashion or any of those other stereotypically girly topics; if anything, she actively tried to avoid them.

Unable to see things the same way as other girls her age, she mostly spent her time obsessing over stories and characters from games, reading old manga, or watching old clips from comedians. But of course, that meant that she was often on a different wavelength from all the other girls—and she'd built up a bit of a complex about it.

As a result, it had only been a matter of time until she'd ended up alone, considered by those around her an outsider; a cold, unusual girl; a gloomy otaku.

Things weren't that much different at home. Sumika didn't exactly have a bad home life, but for one reason or another, she tended to hole herself up inside her room, not even interacting with her own family all that much. If there was anything she could complain about, it was that her brother was doted on more than she was—but that didn't really bother her.

Her biggest hobbies were light novels and games. And today, like any other day, she was planning to get better at magic in *Swords & Sorceries VII*, an online game she'd gotten hooked on after buying it about half a year ago with the money she'd received for New Year's. She was grinding day in, day out to increase her level.

But today, that was all about to change...

*

“Where *am* I?”

Sumika came to in a grassy field.

It was still daylight, and with the sun right overhead, she knew it was probably early afternoon.

What made her doubt her eyes, however, were the two moons in the sky above. Instinctively, she squeezed her eyelids shut over and over, trying to figure out whether something was wrong with her eyes. But there was, indeed, not one moon but *two*.

“Have I—have I actually been summoned to an isekai?! Seriously?! You’re kidding! A world with swords? And magic? And—And maybe they’ll even call me a hero? Yessssss! Time for an adventure!”

This was usually the point where you’d be confused and panic until you got a better grip on the situation. Sumika, however, was a middle schooler.

You might have heard of the word “chuunibyou.” It was a word that fit Sumika well; she was the type of girl to fantasize about unrealistic situations just like this. She accepted what had happened to her in no time at all, and started thinking about what to do next.

Of course, having woken up in a grassy field with nothing around, the obvious cliché was to start looking for a town.

But there was something else she had to do first.

“If this is how things usually go, then I wonder if I can see my status screen... Only one way to find out! *Open status screen!*”

Sumika was following all the usual stereotypes of waking up in another world—and she was shouting with an awful amount of energy.

Still, a status screen did indeed open up before her eyes, just as she’d hoped. It only made her all the more excited. However...

“A message? Huh. Wonder who it’s from? Oh—wait, is this from a god or

something? Or whoever summoned me, maybe?”

Judging by the fact that the message’s subject read, “*About what just happened to all of you,*” Sumika figured it’d be an explanation of how she’d ended up in this new world.



She opened the message, brimming with excitement.

I'm Windia, the goddess of air. So...an explanation, was it? That kind of sounds like a pain, so I'll just give you the short version, 'kay?

It didn't seem like the goddess was taking things very seriously.

So, like, ages ago, we worked with the heroes to beat the Dark God...buuuut, like, we couldn't actually finish it off, right? So we kinda just had to seal it away and stuff.

But then, like, the seal got weaker and all that, and we worried about what to do, so we figured we'd just choose some other random world by drawing lots and seal the Dark God in there. Oh—I'm talking about the world of that game you were playing, by the way. Still with me here? Anyway, it's cool that we beat the Dark God and all, but, I mean, who could've expected it to self-destruct and kill people who were playing the game, y'know?

Anyway, we hadn't actually told the gods over there that we were doing that, so they got totes mad at us when they found out, and we all ended up having to reincarnate you guys over in our world. Well, you're here now, so just...go live however you want, die however you want, whatever.

I mean, it's pretty kind of us to even bring you back to life in the first place, right? And we even remade all the stuff you had in your game and gave it to you here, so you better be grateful. Anyways, that's all~

It was a *really* half-hearted explanation. The pinnacle of negligence. This goddess, or whoever she was, had completely abandoned her responsibilities. And despite going so far as to cause problems for the gods of a whole other world, she didn't seem to have an iota of remorse.

Still, it was enough to let Sumika understand one thing: she had died.

*

"So I wasn't summoned to another world...I was reincarnated into one, huh? I guess that means I'll never be able to see my family again..."

It was, plain and simple, a terrible message to receive.

By the sounds of it, these goddesses had locked up the Dark God in a world

managed by some other gods who were strangers to them, without permission. That had caused all sorts of trouble, including death, for everyone involved—and, going by the contents of the message, the goddesses didn't seem to be sorry at all.

If anything, the message gave off the vibe that the goddesses were getting *defensive*. They seemed incredibly irresponsible.

Sumika hadn't even been told anything about the heroes, or about the need to prevent the destruction of the world; all she knew now was that it had been an entirely man-made (or, well, goddess-made) accident, and what amounted to a suicide bombing by the Dark God. She couldn't help but feel shocked.

Essentially, she'd died for no good reason at all, and had been reincarnated into this world solely so that the goddesses could avoid taking responsibility for what they'd done.

No, it was even worse than not being sorry. She'd pretty much been told, *We reincarnated you, so you'd better be thankful. Okay, that's done! We don't care about you any more.*

Asking her to simply accept that seemed unreasonable. Or at least, it would've been for most people.

But Sumika didn't particularly need a reason.

She was actually *happy* to be released from her boring old life and brought into an unknown new world—and thinking about the adventures that awaited her here had her heart leaping for joy.

Again, she *did* have a bit of a case of chuunibyou.

"Well, whatever happened, I'm in another world, so I'd better get to the usual stuff, right? ♪ Which means I should start by looking for a city."

Just standing around in a grassy field wasn't going to get her anywhere. She had to act with *some* sort of goal in mind, and looking for a city seemed as good a goal as any.

For now, Sumika didn't even know which direction to go in. But one way or another, she'd need to secure her basic needs—food, clothing, and shelter—

and she'd have a hard time doing that without first finding a city to base herself in.

She was, after all, a teenage girl used to living in modern society. There was no way she'd be able to sleep outdoors.

And that thought led her to a bigger realization:

"I've got no idea how to survive in the wilderness. What should I even *do*...?"

Food was the most important of the three basic human needs. But as an indoor person, Sumika didn't even know the first thing about surviving out in the wild. Her life consisted of going home, gaming to her heart's content, and munching on snacks while watching TV; that was about it.

Even without a proper place to stay the night, Sumika would at least be able to rest her body a little; the problem was food. She'd never gone hunting before, so getting food for herself was going to be difficult. Her adventure had only just started, yet she was in danger of falling at the first hurdle.

Checking her status screen as she walked, Sumika was able to confirm that she'd inherited all the stats and abilities of her character from *Swords & Sorceries*.

Her level was 237. By the standards of this world, she was a first-rate mage. Leaps and bounds ahead of a fresh-faced mercenary. Still, she was sorely lacking in any abilities for close-range combat; she'd made her character into a real glass cannon of a mage.

If a wyvern or a basilisk happened to appear before her, Sumika—with no experience in any front-line combat job—would stand no chance of beating it. Her only option would be to run.

If she *did* have to fight one, her death would be guaranteed, simple as that. Her exciting new life would come to a grisly end just moments after it had started.

Sumika let out a groan. "I'm so *hungry*... Where's the nearest city...?"

Unfortunately for Sumika, her inventory didn't contain any food; it was all just healing items and materials.

As she walked along, alone, she only grew more and more anxious. Eventually, tears started to well in her eyes.

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It wasn't long, though, until her luck took a turn for the better.

"Oh...! I see a village!"

Just as the sun was setting and darkness had begun to shroud her surroundings, Sumika saw some simple man-made structures—what looked like a village, in fact—waiting for her on the other side of a hill she'd been walking up for about an hour.

Longing to get back to society, she set off running.

The village was surrounded by a wall made up of planks of wood, and even Sumika was able to understand that it was there to protect the village from intruders. It strongly implied there were monsters in the area.

"There have *gotta* be people in there, right? Hopefully I can beg them to share some food with me!"

Her enthusiasm renewed, Sumika drove away her sense of caution—for better or worse—and started to run as fast as she could. If she'd been thinking normally, she might have paid more attention to the danger implied by the wall. But elated as she was, she was unstoppable, practically a train off its tracks.

Upon reaching the village gate, Sumika *did* realize that there was the possibility of bad people—bandits—being there as well.

She remembered that sometimes, in the light novels she read, villages would work in cahoots with bandits, helping them out with all sorts of crime. Her sense of caution renewed, she walked very carefully through the village gates, preparing herself for an attack to come at any moment.

Fortunately, it was just a normal village. But it didn't take her long to realize that something else was wrong.

Men were walking around with farming equipment in their hands, and there were barricades being put up all around the village.

It was like the whole place was on high alert for an attack, the farmers all

patrolling around and scanning the perimeter.

While resolving to keep her guard up, Sumika called out to a nearby villager.

“What’s happening? It looks like you’ve got a lot of guards around for some reason...”

“Hmm? Who are ya, girly? Don’t seem to ’ave much on ya, for a traveler. Where’d ya come from?”

Sumika’s belongings were stored inside her inventory. From the perspective of the old villager, she must have looked awfully empty-handed for a traveler.

“I kind of got lost, so I’m trying to find a city or something. I’m not sure which way to go...”

“Sounds rough. I think ya might be outta luck, though.”

Sumika paused for a moment before answering. “Huh...?”

For now, she was happy to have found any human settlement at all, so she wasn’t sure what the villager meant about her being out of luck. The man—a farmer, by the looks of him—sighed and gave her a gentle explanation.

“Ya see, our li’l village here...it keeps gettin’ attacked by goblins o’ late. Us villagers ain’t gotten ’urt yet, but we dunno if that’ll keep bein’ the case. They’re comin’ just about every day, now.”

“Jeez. That sounds pretty bad.”

“Oh, it *is* bad. I ’ear there’s some big sort o’ higher-rank golem leadin’ ’em, so they actually got order an’ all that; makes ’em ’ard to deal with. And the li’l buggers keep pullin’ out our crops and stealin’ ’em, roots and all. We got the city to send us some mercenaries, but it’s just two women; I don’t reckon they’ll be able to handle it. Mercenary guild must be short on people or somethin’...”

It seemed like Sumika had come to quite the dangerous village.

But with no money to her name, her only option was to rely on the village for help nonetheless.

She had to secure herself a meal and a bed, whatever it took.

“Wish those darn goblins’d just bugger off and leave us alone...”

“You were talking about a higher-rank goblin...what is it? A goblin king?”

“Nah, sounds like it’s a goblin knight. If it was a general or higher, this place’d be a ghost town by now!”

To Sumika, that information was a godsend. She was a high enough level to beat some regular goblins and a goblin knight, if that were all there was.

If there had been a goblin king, it would’ve spelled trouble; but if the leader was a goblin *knight*, the pack would probably only have twenty or thirty goblins in it. And if it were just that many, Sumika figured her magic would be enough to defeat them without a problem. With that in mind, she figured she could probably secure herself some food and a night’s accommodation, if nothing else, by negotiating here.

She got straight to putting her plan into action.

“Hey, Mister—how about I help you out too? I might not look like it, but I’m a mage.”

“Hmmm? That true? If yer tellin’ the truth, we’d be ‘appy to ‘ave ya, but...this ain’t gonna be fun and games, ya know?”

“I know. Anyway, if I help you out, could you give me some food and a place to sleep? I was being chased by a bunch of scary men before I got here, and I dropped my money and my food along the way...”

“If yer a mage, couldn’t ya’ve just killed ‘em?”

“There were too many. Even a mage has to run away from something like that. We can’t do much if we get surrounded, you know.”

The farmer thought for a moment before responding. “Fine. Ya should be better than those two mercenary ladies we got sent, at least. I tell ya, I don’t like the way one of ‘em’s been lookin’ at our kids... Anyway, we’ll be happy to give ya what ya want if ya can ‘elp us.”

Men from the countryside were generous.

They also tended to put great importance on empathy—making them kind toward people in need.

Even more so when the person in question was a young girl traveling the

dangerous world all by herself.

“Pleasure doing business with you! So, when are these goblins meant to show up?”

“Around sunset. So about now.”

As it turned out, the farmer’s timing was spot-on. Right as he spoke, a high-pitched sound came ringing out from the bell in the guard tower.

“Goblins! The goblins are here!”

“So they’re ’ere again, eh? Won’t be long now ’til everything goes crazy.”

“Where do they usually come from? If they’re goblins, I’d guess they come from a forest, but...”

Going by what she knew about fantasy monsters, Sumika assumed that goblins usually lived in forests or around the bases of mountains and would roam around in packs to look for food.

She was right—and in line with the stereotypes, they’d usually be led by some kind of stronger, more powerful goblin. The more powerful that leader was, the bigger and more dangerous their pack would get. While the villagers had surrounded the village—including their field—with walls made from planks of wood, goblins were physically stronger than humans. They might have been weak by monster standards, but you’d still have been stupid to underestimate them.

“They come from the forest to the east. Anyway, girlie, follow me!”

“Leave it to me! I’ll blow them all up!”

Sumika and the man ran toward the field at the east side of the village.

Having already experienced these raids a number of times before, the villagers had a basic understanding of how the goblins would operate.

The goblins’ main objective was food; their second was to capture females for breeding. In other words, human women.

In the broader scheme of nature, goblins were weak, tending to fall on the side of prey more often than that of predator. If they wanted to survive and

multiply, they had to get themselves food...but if they hunted for it, they'd often be targeted in revenge killings. So it was essential for them to make up their numbers somehow—and they did that by capturing females from other races to serve as their breeding sows.

You never wanted goblins to set their sights on you.

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When Sumika and the man arrived at the field, the goblins had already opened up a small hole in the outer wall surrounding the village. Goblins were starting to funnel through.

They were being taken on by two female mercenaries. One of the pair sported a mess of long red hair, which was being blown about in the wind as she cut down a goblin with a single strike.

A second woman seemed to be protecting the first, brandishing a buckler that she was using to divert the goblins' attacks and occasionally swinging a scimitar with great force to carve up a goblin or two. Her chestnut brown hair was kept in a bob cut, and she had a sexy-looking mole under one eye.

As far as Sumika could tell, the redhead's chest was an E cup, while the woman with chestnut brown hair was on the smaller side of a D cup. It was a vexing sight for Sumika, who was as flat as a board.

"Just look at 'em bounce..." Apparently, Sumika wasn't the only one looking at the women's breasts.

"What are you looking at, you old perv?! Your village is being *attacked* right now!"

"Oh! Right!"

"I swear, men are all so... It's her boobs, isn't it? It's always the boobs! Is that all any of you ever see in a woman?!"

It was a scream from the bottom of Sumika's heart.

Sumika's mother had been on the well-endowed side. And ever since she was young, Sumika had seen her mother's bras and assumed that she, too, would grow up to be like that someday. But much to her frustration, her own breasts

were well below average—barely even an A cup.

Combine that with her petite body, and she tended to get mistaken for being younger than she actually was.

Once, she'd noticed a boy from her class going red in the cheeks after meeting her mother. Later on, she'd realized that the boy had been looking at her mother's *breasts* specifically—and so she'd reached the conclusion that men were only ever interested in women if they had the proportions of a model.

While people doted on Sumika, they doted on her as a *child*. And to Sumika—who had a complex about her appearance—that wasn't what she wanted.

As a girl going through puberty, she had a lot on her mind.

Still, now wasn't the time for that. Sumika turned her attention to the hole that the goblins were streaming in through and fired off an attack spell in its direction.

"I thought you said there wouldn't be that many! Whatever—*Ice Blast!*"

Sumika summoned a block of ice and fired it off, causing the hole—and the goblins swarming around it—to freeze over in an instant.

The goblins froze to death before they could even register what had hit them. In a sense, it was about the most painless death she could've given them.

"Jeez, girlie, yer incredible...!"

"I've closed the hole, but they could still open up a new one. Let's beat the rest of the goblins that made it through while we have the chance. It doesn't look like there are many left."

"Leave it to me! These vermin are only tough in numbers, so without that..."

The farmer brandished a sturdy hunting knife and swung it down onto a goblin's head, cleaving it in two.

Its brains splattered about, dyeing his clothes red. Sumika covered her mouth with her hands.

It was like something straight out of a murder scene, or a particularly gory

horror movie. Not the nicest thing to watch.

The two mercenary women, though, were unfazed, continuing to cut down goblins one after the other. Men from the village were helping out as well—and together, they managed to just about clean up the rest of the goblins that had made it through.

“The ones outside aren’t leavin’! Usually they’d ’ave run off by now...”

“Wait... Don’t tell me those earlier attacks were just scouting?!”

“D-Does that mean they got somethin’ *stronger* than a knight with ’em this time?!”

Goblins were weak monsters, but they were relatively intelligent.

In order to hunt in packs, they’d split into several smaller groups for scouting—and if they found any good prey, they’d report back to the others and send out an advance party, among other such tactics. They’d then stubbornly hound their prey until it was weakened, and only then go in for the kill.

In animal terms, they behaved something like hyenas. But unlike animals, they were able to create and use weapons, which helped them to minimize their losses and make their attacks more powerful. They were surprisingly troublesome enemies for a mere village to deal with.

The defenses surrounding the village were made of wooden fencing and watchtowers, and there was an inner wall and an outer wall, with some space between them. But a hole had been opened up in the walls, allowing intruders to come through.

The goblins had probably scoped out the structure of the walls during their many previous raids on the village.

Most of those attacking now were decoys in the plan to infiltrate the village; the main force had been hiding and trying to gradually open up holes in the wall, and they’d succeeded now in making it through. They might have been monsters, but you couldn’t underestimate their intelligence.

“Get up onto the outer wall! We’ll intercept ’em with our bows!”

“The hell is up with these things? Since when were there so many?!”

“Less talking, more moving! Don’t let these vermin take a step into the village!”

“Once we get through this, I’m gonna marry my girlfriend...”

“Good stuff! How ’bout ya come drink with me at the tavern tonight to celebrate once we’re done ’ere? I’ll give ya the best booze they got, my shout.”

“Treat me to a salad too, will ya? Somethin’ with pineapple in it.”

The villagers were busy setting death flags like crazy—but Sumika hurried to climb up on top of the outer wall and survey the situation outside.

There were easily more than a hundred goblins. And they were spreading out around the border of the village, trying to find the point where its defenses were the weakest and attack from there.

Again, the goblins were far from stupid. Their years of surviving in nature had taught them how to understand situations like this, and they were intelligent enough to target their enemies’ weak spots with precision.

In video games, goblins were always just small fries, defeated in an instant. But here, in reality, they were some of the most cunning, hardworking creatures you could find, and they knew how to make up for their weakness with numbers.

It was highly likely that they’d gotten an idea of their targets’ fighting capabilities over the course of their numerous raids on the village, and the fact that they had come in a larger group tonight meant that they’d probably figured out a decent way of getting inside. Sumika didn’t know all of that, however.

It was all just part of the ongoing struggle for survival, each side putting their lives on the line.

“I guess I should start with that bunch of them standing together, right? *Gaia Lance!*”

Sumika’s spell caused countless spikes of rock to burst out from the ground all of a sudden, skewering the goblins from below. Then she followed it up with an area spell, Rock Needle Field, to make it hard for the goblins to come any closer.

Goblins, of course, didn’t tend to wear shoes. It’d be hard for them to walk

across the ground now that it was covered in razor-sharp needles.

Sensing their dilemma, the goblins grew agitated—and the villagers took advantage of this by sending a barrage of arrows flying toward them.

“Ya didn’t even use an incantation! Yer incredible for a youngin’...”

“Do we really have time for that?! Let’s keep it going!”

“Right—ya all heard the girl! No stoppin’ ’til every last one of those darned gobs is dead!”

A ferocious roar came out from the villagers.

Heartened, they drew their bows as one and kept up the assault.

But while bows were certainly useful weapons, a single arrow wasn’t enough to kill a goblin unless you hit it in the head. And the villagers weren’t all that skilled with their bows, so they were just firing off arrows almost at random, unable to properly aim.

Still, it was effective at stopping the goblins in their tracks, and it prevented them from carelessly advancing.

“You’re open! *Tornado!*”

Out of nowhere, a tornado formed and swallowed up the pack of goblins with ease. And then they fell from the sky—straight onto the Rock Needle Field that Sumika had laid out earlier.

Pierced by the sea of needles, the goblins could do nothing but writhe in pain.

“That sure is some brutal magic ya got there, girly...”

Sumika was silent.

That particular combination of spells had only been a coincidence, but it had created a spectacle that was almost too cruel to watch.

The sight of the goblins in agony—tortured by being turned into living pincushions—was like a scene straight out of hell.

“A-Anyway...what about the rest of the goblins?”

“They’re attackin’ from the west! Someone, go stop ’em!”

“You stay here, Mister. I’ll go, okay?”

“Watch out! Ya don’t wanna be hit by a stray arrow...”

“Thanks. I’ll be fine. I’ll leave this part to you, then!”

Sumika ran along the top of the wall, heading toward the village’s west flank. It looked like the goblins wanted to split up and attack from multiple sides at once, but the largest group had already been annihilated by Sumika.

Still, the all-important higher-ranked goblin had yet to reveal itself. And while the goblins themselves weren’t much of a problem, their numbers could pose an issue. The rest were still outside the outer wall, so it was fine for now—but if they made it inside, things could get dangerous.

As she continued to run along the wall, Sumika spotted a pack of goblins clinging to the wall and trying to climb their way up. She fired off magic at them without hesitation.

“Explode!”

KABOOOOOOOOM!

Explode was the ultimate fire spell.

Not many mages in this world were even capable of using it.

It had a wide area of effect, making it devastatingly powerful. And the heat wave generated in the spell’s aftermath was just as potent, boiling the goblins alive.

While Sumika had tried to limit the spell’s area to minimize damage to the village, the goblins—who had all been packed closely together—took major damage themselves, the area around them turning into a hellish landscape of scorching heat. They were convulsing in agony as flames enveloped them—it was enough to feel kind of sorry for them, monsters or not.

“Ah ha ha... I guess I was right to spend all my money on that spell scroll. But...I’m almost out of mana now. Whoops. I’m getting dizzy...”

Explode had a weakness: as an unmodified spell, it consumed an incredible amount of mana. Firing it off too many times would cause you to run out of mana in a flash. Not that Sumika even *had* the mana to fire it off that many

times...

Hurriedly, Sumika took out a mana potion labeled “Energy Charge: GREAT EFFECT!” and drank it to restore her mana. She felt like it’d be a bad idea for her to pull out of the battle right now.

The potion was something she’d bought in-game from a “Shady Merchant” NPC she’d found on a street corner while strolling around a city. It was incredibly effective.

“Whoa... Where’s *she* from?”

“She ain’t one of *our* lassies, surely?! A mercenary, then? Still, she’s really somethin’, eh...?”

“Yeah... She got those goblins like they were nothin’...”

Sumika’s attack had dealt a heavy blow to the goblins, leaving even the untrained villagers able to deal with what remained.

“Hey, aren’t there any other goblins?”

“Not over ’ere. But I don’t see the big one...”

“‘The big one’? Oh! The goblin knight, you mean?”

“Usually it’d be in among the rest of ’em, but I ’aven’t seen ’im yet. Wonder where ’e got off to?”

Whether you were talking about goblins or other monsters, the leader of a pack was usually the strongest one among them.

It was strange for it not to have appeared yet. The goblins had come attacking in such large numbers tonight, there was no way their leader wouldn’t even show itself. Most likely, Sumika figured, it was staying hidden somewhere, either watching over how the battle played out, or scheming something.

Sumika remembered the goblins in her VRRPG having done similar things, putting together devious plans before attacking.

“Mister—is there anywhere your defenses are weaker? I think the ones outside of where we are might just be decoys...”

“With this many of ’em?! And they’re goblins, ain’t they? I don’t think the

little buggers'd be *that* smart."

"Right? They *are* just goblins..."

Regular villagers, who knew next to nothing about monsters, thought goblins were only as intelligent as wild animals.

That was the common understanding in this world; there was no expectation that they'd put together tactics like humans would. But that understanding was wrong.

Precisely *because* goblins were weak, they gave a lot of thought to the most efficient ways in which they could defeat their enemies—similarly to how humans themselves had managed to survive so long as a species. Why assume that goblins were all that different, then?

"They're attackin' the field! The big one's 'ere!"

Everyone turned their sights toward the field—and saw that the ice Sumika had created earlier to seal the hole had been smashed into pieces, opening the way for a particularly large goblin to come through.

This wasn't a goblin knight, though. It was something stronger.

"You, uh... You know that's not a goblin knight, right? That's a goblin *general*."

"*WHAT?!*" The villagers all let out a cry of shock.

Goblin generals were the next strongest type of goblin after goblin kings and queens. They were so strong that you wouldn't have even thought they were goblins at all; regular mercenaries didn't stand a chance against them.

Apparently, it had been in the initial group trying to make it into the village. But when Sumika's ice magic had sealed up the hole in the wall, it had gotten temporarily stuck, unable to make it out from between the outer wall and the inner wall.

The goblin general, along with the regular goblins, rushed toward the villagers.

"*Ruuuun!* It's a general! You'll die if you try to fight it!"

"Shit! There are still more goblins outside!"

“For now, just run and close the gate to the field! We ain’t got a chance at takin’ ’im on!”

While it wasn’t like goblin generals were completely unbeatable, any monster of a higher rank than its brethren would be significantly stronger, and its danger level rose considerably to match.

There was clearly no way that any of the villagers could deal with it.

“I’m not really the best at fighting close-up, you know...”

Sumika was only a mage; she didn’t have any other jobs. But it wasn’t as if she were *completely* incapable of close-quarters combat.

She’d undoubtedly stand a much better chance than the villagers, at least. And so she went down into the field, brandishing her Runewood Staff and strutting about as if she owned the place, whacking any goblins that got near.

The two female mercenaries, for their part, seemed to be putting up a decent fight against the goblins. But unfortunately, they were outnumbered.

It wasn’t as if the two of them could defeat all of the goblins themselves—and with the goblins that had been outside the wall now flooding in as well, it seemed only a matter of time until the village fell.

Worse, there was now the goblin general to contend with too. It made a ferocious rush toward the red-haired woman.

“Jeanne!”

“Wha—?! *Tch...*”

The red-haired woman—Jeanne, apparently—managed to barely defend herself against the swing of the goblin general’s sword, but the heavy blow sent her flying. Noticing that her comrade was shaken, the rest of the goblins went after her in the meantime—and though she managed to narrowly avoid their attacks, they now had her surrounded.

“*Homing Thunder Arrow!*”

Sumika shot out a homing arrow made of lightning, filled with an unimaginable amount of electricity. It brought a quick end to many of the goblins’ lives—and stunned the others. Noticing the opportunity, Jeanne lopped

off one of their heads with her longsword. Blood spattered about, covering her body with a red that matched her hair.

“Ugh... Gross.”

“Thanks. You saved us. I’m Jeanne; the other one here with me is Lena. We were hired as mercenaries to defend this village. Anyway—that big guy over there’s bad news...”

“I’m...Iris. A wandering mage. Heh heh... Well, then, I’ll cast some support magic on the two of you, so try and get in some hits on it every now and then while you dodge, okay?”

On a whim, Sumika had made up a name as if she were in a game—taking the “Iri” from her family name “Irie,” and the “s” from her given name “Sumika,” to get “Iris.” It wasn’t something she’d been planning to do—but as it came out of her mouth, she just thought, *Oh, well, whatever*, and decided not to worry about it.

There was something more important to focus on right now, after all.

“All right. But he’s even tougher than he looks, you know?”

“Yeah; he *is* a goblin general, so— Whoa! He’s coming!”

Perhaps the goblin general was enraged by seeing its comrades killed, or perhaps it was simply going for a desperate attack. But whatever the case, it came charging toward the women, swinging its sword about with wild abandon.

“Spread out!”

In response to Jeanne’s words, the three of them spread out around the field.

“*Power Boost! Force Shield! Speed Enchant!*”

“She’s casting multiple spells like that? At her age?! No way!”

“Either way, it helps. *Hi-yaaaaah!*”

As Jeanne swung her sword, the goblin general tried to catch her blow and cut her down. But she jumped back in a flash, moving out of the monster’s range.

“Lena!”

“Yeah, I know—leave it to me!”

After pulling back herself, Lena went straight back in, attacked from behind, and then retreated once again. Sumika took the opportunity to cast some more magic and keep the monster in check. She couldn't use fire spells in the field, though—so she attacked with Rock Bullet, an earth spell.

Jeanne and Lena, in turn, capitalized on the spell to go in for another attack themselves—and Sumika backed them up again. The goblin general was at the mercy of the three women.

Huh? Isn't this thing...kind of weak, for a goblin general?

The goblin generals that appeared in Sumika's online game had been quite formidable monsters, even when you factored in their level. But this one felt kind of lacking to her, somehow.

“Oh, well; whatever. Get him, *Plasma Break!*”

An incredibly thick bolt of lightning shot down from the sky onto the goblin general's head—and just as the monster was suffering from the burn, Lena came up and stabbed it with her scimitar from behind. Jeanne followed up without delay, beheading it with a diagonal slash.

This world was no game. If you were able to keep landing powerful hits without leaving even the slightest gap to retaliate, you could beat any monster, rank be damned.

Not to mention, the goblin general had been paralyzed by Sumika's last attack. It hadn't even been able to fight back.

And now for another difference from Sumika's game: here, monsters didn't just disappear when you killed them. The goblin general's corpse slumped lifelessly to the ground, and there it remained.

With the leader of the goblins defeated, the villagers came down from the wall surrounding the area. Presumably the fighting outside of the walls was over as well.

“Whoa! You beat a *general!*”

“What about the goblins outside, Mister?”

“They all ran off. I think we’ll be safe ’ere for a while now.”

“Goblins are weak by themselves, but they can be pretty tough in a group like that, can’t they?”

“Damn straight. But with their numbers down, we should be able to sleep soundly for a while. Well, then, now for the next job...”

The villager stabbed his knife into a goblin, opening up its stomach and pulling out its guts. It was a repulsive scene, and Sumika nearly fainted from the sight of it.

But this was an important job. Dismantling the bodies of defeated monsters was how you retrieved the magic stones and other rare materials they could hold inside.

Goblins, for their part, were typically thought of as worthless monsters with no really useful materials. About the best you could expect was to find a magic stone.

Even if you *did* find a goblin magic stone to sell, you wouldn’t get much for it. But you’d still get *something*—and something was better than nothing.

“*Tch*. No stone in this one. Guess it’s a youngin’.”

“This one had a stone, but it’s tiny. Can we even sell this?”

“Come on! My goblin was the same size as yours! I must’ve ’ad bad luck...”

The sight of the villagers pulling apart goblin viscera with glee was almost like something out of a horror movie. The men were, after all, laughing as they tore into the bodies of humanoid monsters; to Sumika, it was a bizarre spectacle.

The two mercenary women, meanwhile, seemed to be dismantling the body of the goblin general. Sumika simply watched in disgust, looking like she’d been caught up in some sort of terrible tragedy.

“Hey, girly, can ya burn the bodies for us when we’re done? Most of ’em were yer own kills, after all.”

“S-Sure. I’m just...a little tired for now, so I’ll rest for a bit first, okay?”

“Ah, guess ya *are* a mage. No surprise ya’d be outta mana after firin’ off that

many spells.”

It wasn't as if Sumika was actually out of mana. She still had about half of her total mana pool left, and she wasn't particularly tired. She was just starting to feel sick from seeing all those dead bodies get ripped apart.

When the villagers were done, the bodies were all gathered in a single place, and Sumika burned them. Apparently, however, burning goblin corpses at a high temperature made them give off a horrendous stench.

It was enough to make Sumika feel even more nauseous than before.

*

Thirty minutes had passed.

“Hey, Iris. You said earlier you were a ‘wandering’ mage, but...why are you traveling by yourself in the first place?”

“I wanted to get away from my tedious old life. And go on exciting adventures... *Blegh!*”

“Are you seriously not able to dismantle monster bodies? It's something *every* mercenary needs to be good at, you know!”

“I'm, uh, focused on my magic... I just wanna work on *that*. There's no way I could work with corpses...”

Sumika had been brought up in modern society. She'd never be able to dismantle the body of a creature that had been alive just moments earlier.

What she didn't know, however, was that this meeting would be the catalyst to the three of them becoming a team. Without even realizing it, she'd found herself an opportunity for her life in this new world.

Afterward, once the village was done for the day, they held a modest feast to celebrate.

*

It was the second day of cleaning up the mess left by the goblin corpses. The village was still in a celebratory mood.

They'd been tormented by the goblins for a long time—and with the

monsters gone now, it seemed like the villagers would be able to make trips to the city more frequently. That meant that Sumika, too, would finally be able to go to a proper city.

And while it wasn't much, she'd earned herself some traveling expenses as well. She'd at least be able to afford to stay at an inn for a few days.

"Well, well...you comin' along really saved us, eh, girlie? I never thought we'd 'ave a *general* show up. Yer pretty impressive!"

"You already said that yesterday! Anyway, are you really okay with giving me all that money?"

"Ya said ya can't deal with takin' apart the bodies, right? But we still wanted to give ya *somethin'*. A bit of pocket change is nothin' compared to how ya saved the village!"

While it wasn't as if the villagers had managed to harvest magic stones from *every* goblin that had died, they'd still ended up with quite the haul. And thanks to the village's one and only general store using up its funds to buy them all up, the villagers had enough money to help line Sumika's pockets a bit.

"So, where are ya headed now, girlie?"

"Hmm... I think I'll head to the city with Jeanne and Lena and register as a mercenary. Then...I guess I might like to get stronger, and even go dungeon delving or something..."

"Lookin' to get rich quick, eh? Ya'd be gamblin', though. With yer life."

"It's less about the money and more about the adventure, honestly. I want to see all the parts of the world I've never seen before."

"Adventure, huh? I used to dream of that back when I was a li'l squirt myself..."

Tomorrow, Sumika was set to leave this village behind and head to the city. Once she arrived, she was planning to register as a mercenary, then set out and explore this new world as she pleased.

"Yer goin' to Santor, yeah? Be careful. There's all sorts o' nasty grown-ups lurkin' round that place."

“Thanks. I’ll watch out.”

It had only been a few days, but Sumika had been able to mingle with the villagers, and she’d grown fairly close with them.

She felt a little sad to be leaving the village—but it was also going to be her first time setting out on a path that she’d chosen *herself*.

“Hey, Iris—do you know where Lena’s gotten off to? I can’t find her anywhere...”

“Huh? No, I haven’t seen her...” Sumika raised her voice to call out. “Lena? Where are you?”

“Ah. Don’t tell me she’s gone and...”

“What do you mean?”

As Sumika tilted her head to the side, confused, she spotted Lena coming out of the inn.

Her skin was practically glowing with satisfaction.

“Oh, I can see her now—she just left the inn. She looks really happy for some reason, though...?”

“So she *did*, huh...?” Jeanne sighed.

Confused, Sumika looked up at Jeanne, who seemed to be at her wit’s end. She still didn’t know what was going on.

“What do you mean, ‘so she did’?”

“Lena. Did you do it again?”

“Sure did. He was a real cutie...≡”

Sumika still wasn’t sure what exactly Lena had done.

It would be a while longer until she found out about Lena’s...habits.

“Right, everyone—it’s time for a feast! A big one!!!”

“Well, Elder, ain’t *you* excited!”

“Ya’ll collapse again if ya get too worked up, ya know!”

And so, the day gave way to another feast—a feast that stretched on late into the night, the villagers making merry all the while.

The next day, Sumika got onto a horse-drawn carriage with Jeanne and Lena—both suffering from hangovers—and set off for Santor, the city that would become their new base of operations. The journey would take about five days.

It was a journey that signaled the start of a new life for Sumika—or Iris, as she would now be called.

The carriage slowly rolled its way along the road, carrying the petite young girl and all of her hopes and dreams.

So rose the curtain on Iris's life in this new world.

*

About a month and a half later, Iris would have another new encounter.

An encounter with someone from a group she'd long looked up to: the Destroyers, that party of five all-powerful mages who'd ruled over her favorite online game.

That encounter would be the start of a long relationship with a certain middle-aged mage...

But that was a story for another day.

The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
TEACHER'S
Carefree Life in Another World

1
story by
Yasuhiko
Kotobuki



The Diary of A
MIDDLE-AGED
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