

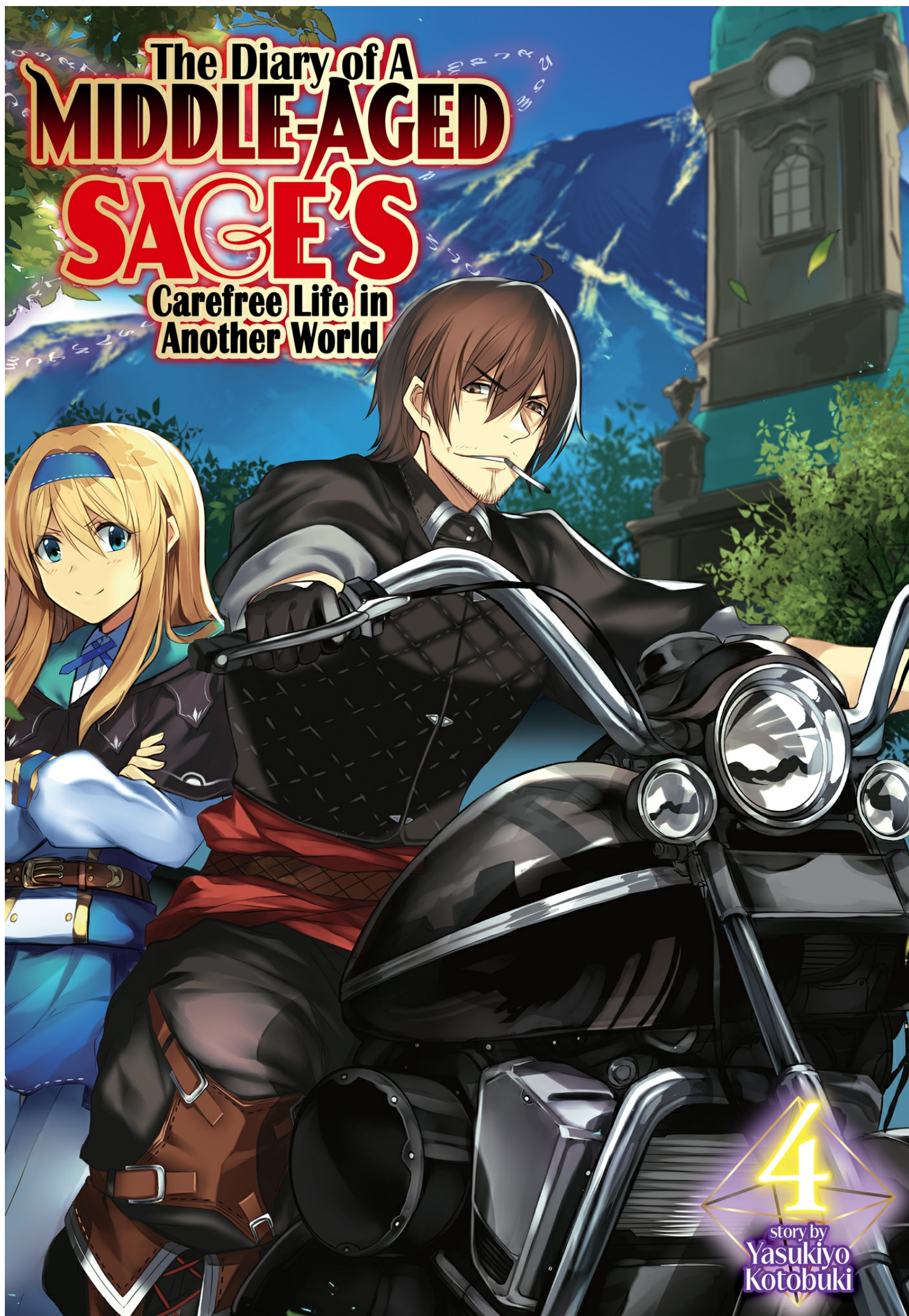


The Diary of A **MIDDLE-AGED SAGE'S**

Carefree Life in
Another World

4

story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki



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“Whoa...
This is
faster
than I
thought!”

“This
should
get us
there
before
long.”

“Ooh!
This
feels so
nice!”

⌘ Jeanne

⌘ Lena

⌘ Iris

Once they were off the boat, Iris and the others hopped in a trailer hitched to Zelos's bike and hurtled along the road. However...

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Prologue: The Old Guy's Blunder

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "fantasy world"? Probably a land of swords, magic, and heart-pounding adventures, right?

Well, that's what you'd usually think. But the figure tearing down the Far-Flung Highway right now flew right in the face of those expectations, as if actively mocking anyone who idealized the notion of a perfect fantasy world.

It was a steel wanderer, the sort you'd imagine rocketing aimlessly down an empty road in the vast countryside, or perhaps making its way along the coast as the evening sun sank below the horizon and pop music began to play in the background.

To be precise, it was a jet-black bike, surging through the green fantasy landscape as fast as a gale wind. A *motorbike*, specifically—the point being, it was just about the last thing you'd expect to see going down a highway that looked like it was out of medieval Europe. It was a real anachronism.

The bike's most notable features were its jet-black color and its ape hanger handlebars. Its height had been adjusted to minimize contact with the ground, though it'd still scrape and give off the occasional spark as it went over an uneven patch of road.

While it was powered by magic and had just been thrown together using whatever parts were lying around, it was modeled after a Harley. And it had been named the...*Harley-Sanders* Model 13. Yep. It was a knockoff, however you looked at it.

Of course, the one *riding* the bike was none other than its creator: a reincarnator known as Zelos Merlin, formerly Satoshi Osako. A forty-year-old bachelor who lived for his hobbies.

The wind buffeted him as he rode, and he was singing the opening theme to a crazy anime from the eighties in which the characters rode motorbikes through the galaxy. He'd come out here on the pretense of a test-drive, but it hadn't

taken long for him to turn into a “Highway Star.”

“Next up... *Listen to my song!*”

And so Zelos drove straight into the next song of his one-man retro anime theme concert. Then once he was done with 7, he continued with *Frontier*...though of course, an ordinary middle-aged man like him was no substitute for a proper diva.

He was choosing some pretty hot-blooded rock songs, so maybe you could say his looks fit the part. But he was a full-fledged otaku on the inside, and a pretty cringeworthy one at that. It was no secret either.

For a bit of a comparison... Well, let’s set the scene. A big, brawny man heads into an old saloon packed with gunslingers. He pulls his gun from his holster, cracks a wry smile, and utters... “Lemme sing y’all my favorite anime opening.” *That* was about how cringe he was.

Still, he was so obsessed with his hobbies that he didn’t particularly *care* what others thought of him. He’d probably be perfectly happy to wander the endless prairies alone, cold stares from onlookers be damned.

Hmm. Ride quality’s not bad. The magic motor’s working properly too. All good for now.

Zelos had put together the motorbike using a combination of ores he’d mined in the Arhaus mine and some magic tools he’d had on hand.

Back when he’d attended an engineering college, he’d spent some time making an energy-efficient car with fellow club members. Then, years later, when he was living out in the countryside, he’d dabbled in motorbike maintenance with a young bike fanatic who lived nearby. So he was fairly knowledgeable when it came to how these sorts of things were made.

Armed with that knowledge, Zelos was confident he could spark an industrial revolution in this fantasy world, if he wanted to. But he was far more interested in just living his own life, at his own pace. Ask him if he *wanted* to trigger change and he’d answer, *It’d just be a pain, wouldn’t it? Why should I have to kick-start a revolution for everyone else?*

Most people who accomplished great things in their lives ended up

shouldering big responsibilities commensurate with what they'd achieved. And Zelos was *not* interested in taking on that sort of responsibility if he had any say in the matter.

Being responsible for his *own* actions was already more than enough for him; he didn't see any need to actively pile more on top. He was entirely willing to leave social progress up to someone else. After all, surely *someone* else would come along and do it, given enough time.

The powerful magic that Zelos wielded as a result of his endless tinkering in *Swords & Sorceries* was a good example.

It was far more efficient than baseline magic, and dramatically stronger to boot. If he were to make it all public, he'd doubtless end up with a throng of sycophants asking him to take them on as his students.

Not to mention, it was plausible that some among that throng would be hiding self-interest and a lust for power, looking to get closer to him for the sole purpose of *using* him. And that'd ruin the freedom he'd worked so hard to obtain, now wouldn't it?

Still, while civilization in this fantasy world wasn't as advanced as it was on Earth, that didn't necessarily mean it was *inferior*. Any time and place is defined by the efforts of those who live through it, and those efforts eventually coalesce into *history*—a history that can be built upon to shape the society of the future.

Sure, Zelos had some advantages over most of the people in this world, but he wasn't thrilled by the idea of having his entire life defined by that. And he had no intent to actively work toward the betterment of civilization.

He might've already made a big splash in the world, but he was still doing his best to avoid anything that'd lead to *too* rapid a societal development. He was willing to teach people things that could provide the spark for that sort of development down the line, but he was leaving anything beyond that to the efforts of others.

I mean, even my motorbike here could change the course of a war, depending on how it's used. Not that I intend to sell it to anyone, of course...

Maybe a certain duke somewhere would want to get his hands on it. A duke

with a violent, mysterious air about him. He'd probably be *most* intrigued by this little toy Zelos had made for himself.

Considering what it took to make it, though, the motorbike wasn't suited to mass production. After all, it used all *sorts* of rare materials: mithril, orichalcum, and a sagestone, to name a few. Just making this one motorbike had used up enough assets to easily throw an entire nation's budget into disarray.

I could make it cheaper if I really tried to, but if someone else wants one, I'd prefer they just make it themselves. It'd lose some of its charm if I mass-produced it, anyway.

Zelos had his pride. He wasn't intent on making anything in bulk, whether it be a weapon, a piece of armor, or anything else. He could make exceptions for things like healing potions, but as a general rule, his specialty was making one-of-a-kind designer items.

If someone gave him the materials, he'd also be willing to craft pieces of equipment in line with the user's skills, like he'd done with Jeanne's sword. But if anyone ever asked him to craft something en masse for use in war, he had every intention of saying no. Sure, he was happy to craft lots of weapons, but only if they were all *different* weapons, each with their own capabilities. That was what made it fun.

He really *did* live for his hobbies.

"All righty... I think it's time to test it at a higher speed. It seems to run fine at the speed I'm at now, so let's see how fast this baby can go."

Zelos went full throttle with the accelerator, and his Harley-Sanders Model 13 started getting faster and faster.

Making a mechanism for shifting gears would've been a pain, so Zelos had designed this bike to work pretty much the same way as an automatic moped.

He was going pretty fast now. The bike took a sudden curve by storm, and it had no trouble making it up a perilous peak.

But this wasn't Japan, where the roads were constantly maintained. It was a whole other world; you could never know *what* issues you were going to encounter on the road. And Zelos certainly wasn't thinking about any

pedestrians.

Speaking of which, just after he crested the peak...

“*Whoa?!*”

Zelos spotted some merchants being attacked by monsters. A battle was unfolding, each side with their lives on the line.

Mercenaries were fighting to protect the merchants’ carriages. Their foes were monsters in search of food—orcs.

It was a common enough occurrence. But the problem with *this* attack was there was an orc *king* among the pack, more intelligent than the other orcs. The merchants were completely surrounded, and they were in danger of losing their lives at any moment.

The mercenaries would probably have been fine if they were just up against regular orcs. But the addition of an orc king to the attack made things far more difficult. Depending on its level, an orc king could be between a C-rank and an A-rank threat.

Some of them could even get powerful enough to evolve into demon lords; that was how dangerous they were. The presence of just a single orc king made the attack too much for the guards to deal with.

Zelos only looked at the scene for a moment, but it was clear to him that the mercenaries were getting trounced, despite their best efforts.

His bike, meanwhile...was going too fast to stop in time. He could hit the brakes, but at the speed he was going, he’d need a lot of distance to come to a stop. It was the simple law of inertia. And so, he had a realization:

“Oh. I’m gonna crash.”

Having given up any hope of coming to a proper stop, Zelos decided—who *knew* what was running through his mind—to do the exact opposite.

He turned the throttle.

The immense figure of the orc king grew closer and closer. Words weren’t enough to describe how intimidating it looked.

Fortunately for Zelos, though, it had its back turned to him.

“GYABH?!”

“Oh, gods...”

And then came the crash. The orc king was sent flying by the force of the bike pummeling into it. It collided with several other orcs as it flew through the air, and it was injured to the verge of death.

But Zelos and his bike weren’t done. They continued to topple orcs, one after another, as they thundered along the highway.

In another time and place, Zelos would be guilty of vehicular manslaughter. It’d be a clear-cut case of a brutal hit-and-run—no dissent among the jury.

Here, though, he was free to continue on his merry way, leaving dead orcs and a gaggle of utterly dumbfounded merchants and mercenaries in his wake.

“Phew... *I’m doing something extremely wicked.*”

As Zelos tried to play off the incident with a barely relevant reference, he pulled the brake lever in an attempt to slow down. But slow down he did not.

He tried again. And again, and *again*. But his bike remained as fast as ever.

“Jesus.”

It seemed like crashing into the orcs had damaged the bike’s brake cable, leaving Zelos unable to come to a stop. Worse, it seemed to be affecting both the front and back wheels.

And as the cherry on top, the throttle was stuck on.

“Y-You’re kidding... You’re *kidding* me, right?!”

There was no slowing down. This was bad.

The Harley-Sanders Model 13 only continued to accelerate, as if it were actively mocking its creator.

This was a highway, and there’d probably be more merchant carriages up ahead. Plus, the bike’s mana tank was full. There was no knowing how long it’d take to empty it.

Figuring that out was part of why Zelos had gone out on this test-drive in the first place, after all.

There was no one to save him. No one in this world was even capable of catching up to a high-speed motorbike.

Zelos hadn't designed the bike with a key either. He'd justified his corner-cutting back then on the basis that he'd been stripped for time—but whatever his excuses, he was regretting it now. He broke out into parched, manic laughter, which only rang out in vain along the highway. What would he have done if someone had stolen this and ridden it themselves?

Flaws like this only ever came to light when it was too late.

Chapter 1: Celestina Escapes the Loner Life

It was a common sight: Celestina was walking with purpose to the Istol Academy of Magic's library, also known as the "paper mountain," to continue her research into magic formulas.

This was her daily routine—as was the fact that no one greeted her as she went about it. It was a bit of a lonely scene. But that, too, was the norm, so she tried not to pay it too much mind.

Still... To be honest, her lack of friends *had* kind of been getting to her lately.

Back when Zelos was tutoring her, she'd had plenty of opportunities to talk to people.

Here at the academy, though, there was no one who talked to her apart from her classmate Carosty, and it left her keenly aware of how alienated she was, whether she wanted to be or not. Just recently, her reputation had done a one-eighty from "failure" to "prodigy," putting a prompt end to the cruel gossip that had been going around behind her back. But honestly, she almost missed the days when people would intentionally insult her within earshot. It hadn't been very pleasant, sure, but at least it hadn't felt as lonely as this...isolation.

As things were, even the *teachers* at the academy were hesitant to approach her.

To be fair to those teachers, Celestina *had* been assaulting them with tough questions—or rather, piercing criticisms—in class for a while now, leading them to tremble in fear at the sight of her. Feeling they had nothing they could teach her at this point, they'd simply given up on conversing with her at all.

It was pretty much like they were saying, "We can't handle you! Just go do your own research by yourself, please! We're begging you! *We can't teach you anything!*"

Her brother Zweit had been similarly abandoned by his teachers—but while he was willing to point that out rather aggressively and fight back against them,

Celestina's response had been more passive. It left her free to devote herself to analyzing magic formulas, but still, the fact that no one but Carosty ever tried to talk to her was a little sad.

Like most people, she just wanted a friend she could casually chat with.

She let out a sigh.

"And so the duke's daughter spent another day researching her magic all alone. What a lamentable youth..."

"Miska... You really don't hesitate to hit people where it hurts, do you?"

"That's just who I am. Everybody's favorite coolheaded lady. The most lovable. The most brazen. Are you only noticing now?"

"What do you *mean*, am I only noticing now?! Why do you sound like you're *boasting* about it?!"

For some reason, Miska looked mighty proud of herself, puffing out her chest and pushing her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. Her satisfaction was on par with Celestina's disdain.

She really did have quite the twisted personality.

"Anyway, milady, simply waiting around will not earn you any friends, you know? Sometimes, speaking with your *fists* can be the best way to make friends. Though of course, failure can leave you with nothing but a grudge instead..."

"What are you even suggesting there?! Are you telling me to go and vent my emotions in some big fistfight on the beach at sunset?!"

"Milady...why are you familiar with that kind of story? A lady of the honorable Solistia ducal house should hardly be privy to something so uncivilized as that."

"Aren't *you* the one who was just telling me to 'speak with my fists'?! And you were the one who introduced me to that story in the first place!"

"...Ah. I suppose I was, now that you mention it. It happened so long ago that I'd forgotten all about it."

"It was *three days* ago! Is that really such a long time?!"

Given her lack of friends, Celestina was usually cooped up inside her room. Frankly speaking, she had a lot of time on her hands. She made sure to set aside plenty of time for her lectures and her magic formula research, but that still left her with a lot of free time, and she often used it to read novels and other books she borrowed.

Three days prior, Miska had given her a book she'd been recommending, *Young Rampage: Love and Fistfights*. It was a bit of an extreme story, ultimately delving into a tale of *passionate relationships* between young men, and Celestina had gotten obsessed with it.

As she'd read through it, she'd gradually realized that she was falling into a trap laid by Miska...but aware of it or not, she was unable to stop herself from starting down the path of a closet fujoshi.

Miska huffed with pride. "I live for the moment. You can't expect me to be concerned with every little detail about the past."

"But you always seem *very* concerned about your *age*, don't y— Eep!"

All of a sudden, Miska grabbed Celestina by the shoulders and got right up in her face. Her glasses shone with a fiery gleam, and a pitch-black aura radiated from her every pore. It looked like Celestina had stepped on a land mine.

"Milady...did you just say something, perchance? I didn't quite hear you. Could you repeat that for me, please?"

"A-Ah... No. No, I didn't say anything. You must be imagining things, Miska..."

"I see. All is well, then. Still, if I may be so bold as to give you some advice... A single careless remark can prove *fatal* in today's world, milady. I would suggest that you be *very careful* with your words in the future... Do you understand?" She trailed off into an ominous laugh.

"Y-Yes!"

Trembling with fear, Celestina turned almost robotically at a right angle and continued her walk to the library with a noticeably awkward gait. She was so afraid that she didn't even realize she was swinging her left arm together with her left leg, and her right with her right.

The girl's reaction left Miska...awfully pleased with herself. There was that twisted personality of hers again.

The two of them continued their walk along the path they'd traveled many times before. But it wasn't long before Miska spotted a group of girls and tilted her head, puzzled.

"Look over there, Milady."

"What is it?"

Looking in the direction Miska was pointing, Celestina saw what seemed to be a group of girls harassing a single girl who was by herself. On closer look, Celestina was able to sense something like a wave of mana from the group—as if they were using magic—and she noticed that the lone girl seemed to be tied up, unable to move.

By the looks of it, someone had cast a low-rank binding spell on her; there was something like a sigil on the ground, and the girl was bound by an invisible force field. It was a restraining spell called Force Bind.

While the sigil, which had been formed with mana, wasn't visible to the naked eye, it was possible to "see" its shape in a sense by interpreting the mana that reached your eye.

"That's the Force Bind spell, is it not?"

"We're not allowed to use magic on academy grounds, unless it's for training or we have permission. We should tell them to stop. Now."

"Please wait, milady. It is too early for us to tell which side is at fault. I suggest it would be best for us to wait and see how things play out before deciding to intervene."

"You're... You're right. Let's hide ourselves and get closer, then. *Mirage Curtain*."

Mirage Curtain worked by distorting light to hide the user from others. It had a drawback—if people were looking close enough, they could see the space around you distorting as you moved—but that wasn't a big issue unless someone was actively keeping an eye out for you.

The caster could keep the spell active for as long as they wanted to, but the longer they kept it up, the more mana it would consume, and the more likely they were to be spotted by someone with the Detect Mana skill. Students at the academy didn't usually have high-level skills, though, so Celestina figured she was unlikely to be spotted.

She didn't realize that in using the spell, she was violating the very same school rule that she was trying to stop the others from breaking. Using magic on academy grounds without permission was against the rules, despite whatever justification you might have.

Celestina sneaked closer to the group and waited to get a better idea of what was going on.

"Think you're a real hotshot, huh? With that tiny mana pool of yours?!"

"You don't belong in a place like this, you failure. Get out of our academy! You're an eyesore."

"You're really glaring at us, huh? What do you think *that's* gonna do for you? How about you use some magic on us? Oh, that's right—you *can't*. Aha ha ha ha ha!"

"Mnnngh! This is— Agh!"

The one caught up in the binding magic was a beastfolk girl.

She was part of the Hound Clan—so called because of the members' distinctive doglike ears. The fact that she was here at this academy, though, meant that she was likely of mixed blood.

She was trying to break out of the Force Bind using sheer physical strength.

"Really, though—a *beastfolk*? Trying to learn *magic*? Learn your place!"

"You'll never be able to do anything with your life anyway; how about you just save everyone the hassle and leave now? You'd be making the place a bit cleaner—we wouldn't have to put up with that wild animal smell anymore."

"Yeah. You stink like a wet dog. It's foul. Can you just leave already?"

It was clear now: this was bullying. A common sight around the academy.

From what Celestina could see, it seemed likely that the group of girls weren't of noble birth but rather the daughters of merchants. If they were nobles, they'd probably be wearing expensive magic rings or something else of the sort for self-protection. But these girls had nothing like that, so it seemed likely they were just your average students.

Right now, though, that was the last thing on Celestina's mind.

She may be a beastfolk, but she's probably not a pure-blooded one, right? Still, I've heard that some beastfolk children can be born with a lot of mana, and the fact that she's here at the academy in the first place probably means she meets some sort of standard for mana... I know beastfolk aren't meant to be very good at using magic, but Master was saying they can make up for it by circulating mana through their bodies to improve their physical abilities. In that case, I don't know why she's struggling to break out of a binding spell like that... Or is it that she doesn't know how to do it?

Beastfolk were typically better suited to fighting in the vanguard than they were to providing support from the back of a fight as mages. Most beastfolk could circulate mana throughout their body, and some were even able to punch their way through opponents' magic to destroy it. Canine beastfolk could also boost their mobility and attack power, and they had about twice as much magic resistance. Put it all together, and they were practically the natural enemies of mages.

They didn't have as much mana as humans, but they were good at making use of what mana they had for all sorts of different things.

I think I remember Master teaching something like this to Zweit...

Celestina's mind went back to a certain incident in the Far-Flung Green Depths.

Zweit had seen Zelos defeat a monster with his fists, prompting him to ask whether he'd be able to do the same thing himself. That was when Zelos brought up the beastfolk and their fighting style as an example.

When Zweit learned it was possible to boost your physical attributes like that, he'd tried it out himself. But he hadn't had an easy time controlling the flow of mana throughout his body; even now, he was still spending a lot of time

practicing it. Clearly, he had his heart set on mastering it.

Celestina could clearly recall how the conversation had gone:

“Listen closely, Zweit. It’s not just about keeping the mana inside your body. You need to...sort of imagine it building up below your belly button, in your abdomen, and then knead it there inside your body. That’s the trick. Then when you feel it getting hot, you want to picture it circulating all through your body, filling every nook and cranny. That’s important. It’s also the hardest part.”

“T-Teach... This isn’t as easy as you make it sound! Are the beastfolk seriously able to do this?! Manipulating mana’s damn tough...”

“Well, it comes instinctively to the beastfolk, you see. If a *human* wants to strengthen their body, they’ll have an easier time boosting it using magic. Though that *does* make it easier for other mages to detect you—as opposed to the beastfolk method, where that’s not a problem. It’s no different from pumping blood around inside your body, after all.”

“What’s the big difference? They both use mana, don’t they?”

“Detect Mana works by sensing mana that’s emitted from the body and investigating it. But if you’re just moving mana around inside your own body, it doesn’t actually get emitted in the first place, so enemies won’t be able to use it to detect you. On the other hand, if you’re using magic to boost your body, the mana has to leave your body at some point in order for you to cast the spell. So even if both ways have the same effect, one’s a lot more hidden than the other.”

“That’d make fighting beastfolk a pain in the ass for mages, wouldn’t it?!”

“Yup! They’re very capable as a species; they’ve got the perfect balance of reason and instinct. And they can rely on those things to make expert use of just a little bit of mana—it makes them great at cleaning up mages in a fight. You don’t want to end up on their bad side. I’ve heard they even have a sixth sense for detecting mana from enemy mages. If you try and fight one, I imagine it’d be a very one-sided fight. With you losing. Badly.”

Afterward, Zelos had drilled this mana circulation technique into Zweit for about three hours, and the young man ended up able to at least use it to some

extent. But the next day, he had been racked by muscle pain.

Fortunately for him, all the leveling up he'd been doing had optimized his body, so the hellish muscle pain had only lasted for a day.

So this girl should have an instinctive knack for using her mana... Is it just that nobody ever told her how to do it?

Beastfolk had keen instincts that helped them make good use of their mana, but their parents still needed to teach them the basic method through play when they were young. Beastfolk children learned the technique from watching their parents use it; it was the natural learning process. To humans, it was a hand-to-hand combat skill honed through a lifetime of effort, but to beastfolk, it was something basic they learned right from the early stages of their life.

In exchange, the beastfolk tended to be worse at using magic. But by the looks of it, this beastfolk girl here must have been raised in an environment where she didn't naturally acquire the skill like other beastfolk did. In other words, Celestina conjectured, she'd been raised by humans.

"Seriously... What's the point of you *having* mana if you don't even know how to use it?"

"Right? You're just a failure. No better than a pile of trash. You get what I'm saying?"

"The academy would be better off if scum like you just went and died somewhere. I mean, why are you even *alive*?"

The words from the group of girls were making Celestina angrier and angrier.

Not that long ago, people had been saying similar things to her, and she'd had no choice but to put up with the humiliation. People had uttered all sorts of cruel, spiteful remarks right behind her back. But given her inability to use magic, she'd simply continued to endure it. She knew all too well how the beastfolk girl here must be feeling.

And so she decided to act on those feelings.

She whispered into the beastfolk girl's ear, "Gather your mana around the area below your belly button. Try and picture yourself slowly kneading it inside

your body.”

The girl’s tail stood on end for a moment. She was clearly surprised.

But Celestina wasn’t done whispering yet.

“When you feel the area under your abdomen getting hot, take that mana and imagine sending it all throughout your body. First, to your heart. Then, to every little corner of your body. Take it nice and slow.”

The beastfolk girl didn’t know what was happening, but she could tell from her sense of smell that there was someone next to her.

And when she realized that that someone was trying to teach her something, she followed the instructions she was given. Mana started to course through every part of her body.

She was surprised by just how easily she’d managed to do it. But more than that, she could feel herself being enveloped by an entirely novel sensation.

It was like a raging fire had been lit inside her body. The fire was spreading, *growing*, and she could feel strength starting to well up inside her.

Actually, no—it was more than just a feeling. She *was* getting stronger. And as she did, the sensation of it brought her instincts to life. The flow of her mana, which had been clumsy at first, gradually took shape into something more refined. It felt like it was something she’d known how to do all along. It was almost nostalgic.

“Hey. Nothing to say to us? Well, I guess you *are* just a wild animal that can’t even get out of a binding spell—I shouldn’t expect you to know how to speak like a human, huh~? See, this is why I hate savages...”

“I know, right? Only *humans* can use magic. We were *chosen*. Your kind should just go back to your dirt holes. You shouldn’t even be wearing clothes—seriously, who do you think you are?”

“You frustrated? How about you try and fight back? Come on. Do it. Bet you can’t, though. I mean, you’re just a dirty animal... ♪”

“Well, if I’ve got your permission, then...”

The bullies responded with a synchronized “Huh?!”

For the first time, the beastfolk girl grinned. A fierce, confident grin.

Up until now, she'd seemed bitter. Frustrated. But she'd never shown a face like this.

For an instant, it made the other girls hesitate. But before long, they remembered their target was tied up, regained their composure, and went back to provoking her.

"Hmph. If you think you can do anything to us, just try! A beast like you won't be able to break our magic anyway!"

"All right, then. I won't hold back..."

SNAP!

With a high-pitched sound, the mana that had been binding the girl was shattered into pieces. She was free.

What was more, sharp claws were extending out of her fingers, and animallike hair was starting to cover her skin.

It was a phenomenon known as Bestialization. It would roughly triple the user's physical capabilities all at once—and the average mage, who was weak in close-quarters combat, would struggle to put up a fight. Though the longer it was used, the more of a strain it would put on the body.

"Never knew binding magic was so easy to break. Why was I never able to do that before?"

"Y-You broke out of it? No way! How?!"

"H-How did... But you've never... Were you holding back?! A damn *animal*, holding back on us?!"

"So... You were telling me earlier to fight back? Because I feel like it'd be *easy* to kill you all right now."

The girl licked her lips, almost like a predator, as she glared at her bullies. It wasn't as if beastfolk were completely incapable of using magic. It was just that they were more limited than humans in the spells they could use, and that they were more specialized in utilizing their mana for combat.

It was clear: the predator was free now, and she was preparing to pounce. The hunters had become the hunted.

But just as the girl was about to leap toward her enemies, a voice rang out from the invisible third party.

“Wait!”

For a moment, everyone stopped. And then...

“Hurry up and show yourself already. You’re there, aren’t you?”

“Beastfolk really *do* have keen senses. Were you able to sniff me out?”

“Well, yeah.”

A distortion appeared in the air, and before long, a girl appeared out of it.

“M-Miss Celestina...”

“N-No way! Don’t tell me—was she watching us the whole time?!”

“Shit! W-We should run!”

Ignoring the panicked bullies, Celestina looked the beastfolk girl in the eye and spoke to her. She couldn’t care less about the bullies and their twisted views.

“So, that was the beastfolk technique for using mana... How was it? I didn’t think you’d bestialize too, though. I’ve never seen it happen before.”

“Yeah. Feels good. So *this* is how you use your mana as a beastfolk...”

“Did you not know how to before? I thought it was meant to come naturally to beastfolk...”

“It’s... Hmm. How should I put it? I’m adopted. When my birth parents died, my current parents—who were their friends—ended up taking me in and raising me. They’re mages.”

“Oh, you’re adopted? So *that’s* why you weren’t able to use your mana like other beastfolk. That makes sense; I figured that even if you had mixed blood, your parents would have taught you how to fight... Oh! Wait! Sorry! I really should think more before I speak!”

“Eh, it’s fine. I don’t even remember my birth parents’ faces. Apparently my mother was a beastfolk, though.”

It seemed like the girl was of mixed blood, with more beastfolk traits than human. It checked out, given her apparent struggles with using magic.

“Now, you girls...” Celestina glared at the group of bullies. “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

“Y-Yes...”

The group of girls didn’t seem to know whether to run away or just stay frozen to the spot.

Celestina had been a bullying victim before. They couldn’t imagine her just overlooking the incident.

But even if they ran, the end result would be the same, seeing as their victim could identify them by name.

“If you start using force on other people, you can’t complain when they do the same to you—even if they end up destroying you. Do you realize that? Besides, are you girls really powerful enough to be lording it over others? Everyone starts out weak. But if someone sets their mind to it, there’s no limit to how strong they can get. Imagine if this girl you’ve been bullying here decided to hold a grudge and came back years later, far stronger, to kill you all. You’d have no right to complain. Since *you* were the ones who decided that might makes right.”

Celestina was starting to sound like a certain middle-aged man. Really, though, she was just repeating what she’d heard from him before—and Zelos himself had done the same, merely teaching her things he’d heard from others in *his* past. Still, even Celestina was worrying internally, *What am I doing, speaking like I’m some know-it-all?*

Still, she decided to push on. Her priority was to make these girls reflect on their actions.

“Beastfolk have a strong sense of camaraderie. Even if they’re raised among humans, they’d never think to abandon their brethren. And they’re practically a natural counter to mages. Do you even realize what you were doing, making an

enemy out of someone like that?”

“How are beastfolk meant to ‘counter’ us mages? They can’t even use magic!”

“They *can*, actually. Though they’re best at physical reinforcement magic rather than things like attack spells. What this girl used just now was a physical reinforcement skill known as Bestialization. And you can’t detect a beastfolk’s mana when they use it. But *they* have excellent senses, so they can detect *you*—they’d be able to suddenly appear right next to you and take you out in an instant. Do you think you could defeat someone like that? Or are you just assuming your enemy’s always going to announce themselves and walk up to you for a fair fight?”

Beastfolk were entirely willing to use any means at their disposal in order to protect their brethren.

If news of this bullying incident got around to other beastfolk, it could, in the worst-case scenario, devolve into a war. That was how strong their bonds were—and how merciless they could be toward their enemies.

The bullies here had only seen their behavior as some light amusement for the day. But on realizing that that “amusement” could turn into a *war*, their faces suddenly paled, and their arms and legs were left trembling uncontrollably.

If what they were doing *did* spark a war, and word got out that they were the ones responsible for starting it, there’d be no escaping execution—for them and for their entire families. They were playing with fire.

“Our country welcomes people regardless of their species. That’s how we’ve been able to get to where we are today. It’s a historical fact. But what you girls are doing could destroy everything that’s gotten us—do you not understand that?”

“I-It’s not like we’re...”

“It’s not just us! There are plenty of other people doing the same thing!”

“Yeah! Why are you only going after us?! And you were a failure yourself until just recently...”

“So just because *other* people are behaving horribly, you think you can use them as an excuse to do the same thing yourself? Thinking like that makes you even worse than them. Also...yes. I was powerless before. But have you girls really put in the effort to get stronger? Could you go into the Far-Flung Green Depths? I know the skills of the average student here—do you really think you’d make it through a single day there alive?”

The bullies winced.

Everyone knew by now that Celestina had gone through harsh combat training in preparation for her recent trip to the Far-Flung Green Depths. That was thanks to her older brother Zweit; when asked about it by his friends, he’d said, “Jeez, that training was *hell*. I’m amazed Celestina managed to tough it out, no kidding! We were only up against golems, but they kept getting up however many times we beat ’em down... It never ended. If that was a real fight, I don’t even *know* how many times we would’ve died...”

Celestina had kept up with that training for more than a month, and eventually, she’d managed to complete it through force of effort. Knowing that, the girls here were unable to say anything back to her.

If this had been months ago, when she was incapable of using magic, they would’ve felt free to insult her behind her back, to ridicule her. But now, she was practically on a higher plane of existence. Even the academy’s teachers couldn’t stand up against her.

She’d gotten to where she was now through considerable effort, and that was common knowledge. So whatever they tried to say against her now, they’d just sound like sore losers. After all, they hadn’t actually put in the effort to get stronger themselves...

“I’m going to be honest: most of the students here would be useless in a battle. More than half of them are just here to learn alchemy, and even then, their chances at getting a job with it are going to depend on their ties with the factions. They might have learned magic, but most of them will end up in a job that doesn’t even use it—it makes me question why they’re coming here in the first place.”

Celestina wasn’t pulling any punches.

The majority of students who came here to become mages would end up just fading away, unable to actually work in the field, once they got out into society. And the same went for those who learned alchemy.

Generally, they'd struggle to get their hands on medicinal herbs, leaving them unable to create magic potions—and if they tried to go out and collect those herbs themselves, the fact that they were no better than amateurs in a fight would come back to bite them. They wouldn't have the money to hire guards, and ultimately, they'd end up just giving up on the whole endeavor. That was how things went most of the time.

The only ones who *were* able to work as alchemists were a handful of people who'd achieved enough to get in the good graces of one of the factions and certain merchants whose families had a good income.

Even then, though, the efficacy of magic potions could differ significantly depending on the skills of their creators. So if you wanted repeat business from the mercenaries and knights who staked their lives on those potions in battle, you had to be pretty skilled. If you weren't, you'd end up destitute before long.

There *was* the occasional oddball who'd harvest some medicinal herbs while they were out hunting, and use them to help out their village or something. But those types were rare; the average person prioritized making money. And with so many people out there with that same priority, only a handful would ultimately manage to succeed, whether as alchemists or as mages more broadly.

One reason for that was that spell scrolls tended to be expensive: if you weren't rich, you'd have a hard time affording them. So the average mage just couldn't use that many spells. Recently, though, a certain company in a certain duchy had started selling spell scrolls for cheap. So maybe society had a chance of getting some more mages who *weren't* just academy graduates in the future.

People didn't need mages with an academic record. They needed mages who were *useful*.

"I know not everyone comes here because they want to work as a mage. Some people are just here for an academic record that can help them find a marriage partner. But if a war breaks out, anyone who's on the record as a

mage will be rounded up to fight. And if you don't have the skills to match your qualifications, you'll probably just end up dying in vain..."

"War? That's the *country's* problem to deal with!"

"Have you forgotten? Any mages who've enrolled at the academy are reserves. We could be sent out to fight if a war happens. And if there *is* a draft, they won't discriminate by gender—we could all end up out there. Even if you're an alchemist. As long as you can technically cast attack spells, you'll probably be sent out to the battlefield. Besides: racial discrimination's a serious crime. You know that, don't you?"

Students of the Istol Academy of Magic were conscripted to the military even after graduation; if an emergency happened, they probably *would* be sent to the battlefield. This was laid out by national law, and there was an agreement between the academy—which provided the students with special treatment—and the guardians of those students.

The formal military of Solistia didn't have enough standing personnel to wage war. If it wanted to invade another country, defend against an invasion, or whatever else, it simply didn't have enough soldiers on hand to stand a chance. And so it would draft regular citizens into military service to make up the numbers and bolster the country's fighting force.

Of course, that force would include beastfolk as well. So if the behavior of the bullies here led to unnecessary friction with the beastfolk, that in and of itself could deal a major blow to the country's military power.

Because of that, this sort of discrimination was treated as a crime. It might be petty bullying between minors, but the punishment could be severe.

"We don't even *need* the beastfolk, do we?!"

"Yeah! We've got our wide-area annihilation magic!"

"I don't think you'll be able to use it. For starters, it needs a whole group of mages to synchronize their mana, which is practically impossible. And even if you *can* get it to activate, there wouldn't be enough mana to make it actually work. The latest opinions are that it's nothing but a useless prototype from ancient times. Think about it for a second—have you ever actually *seen* it

activated? And by the way: you girls are from the Wiesler faction, right?”

“Ngh...”

“Th-That’s...”

The third girl stayed silent.

The subfaction of bloodline supremacists within the Wiesler faction included a lot of individuals of noble birth who had fallen from grace and were now desperate to reclaim their former glory.

The common ground that tied them all together was the formula for wide-area annihilation magic, and the testing grounds for said magic. But no one had actually managed to activate the spell yet, and research wasn’t exactly making stellar progress.

Lately, the faction’s finances had been tight too—primarily due to the Solistia faction making a concerted effort to crush the Wiesler faction’s sources of funding. In other words, Celestina was part of the very same family working to thwart the ambitions of the bloodline supremacists.

And now that the spiteful behavior of the bullies had been found out by someone related to the Solistia faction—the Wiesler faction’s newfound sworn enemy—the Solistia faction would undoubtedly have a solid angle of attack to help take them down.

The girls had been caught red-handed by just about the worst witness imaginable.

“What’s even the point in bragging about your lineage when you’re not putting in any actual effort to get strong yourselves? It’s ridiculous how far you’ve gone with this.” Celestina sighed. “My brother must really be up against it in the Wiesler faction. I never knew how bad it was...”

Zweit had been brainwashed for a good while, but funnily enough, he’d broken out of it as a result of his onset of love syndrome, having essentially gone into heat. In his efforts to take his mind off his broken heart, he’d ended up setting his sights on the bloodline supremacists. And after a while of him thoroughly antagonizing them, the faction had essentially been torn in two, leaving it difficult to tell how things were going to play out from here.

As a side note, the original founder of the Wiesler faction was apparently overjoyed to hear of Zweit's efforts.

Given the situation, it was only a matter of time now before Samtrol, the ringleader of the bloodline supremacists, would be cut off from his family. Though Zweit's thoughts on that particular matter were something like *Hurry up and deal with him already!*

The only ones who *didn't* know what was going to happen to Samtrol were the boy himself and a handful of his retainers.

"From what I've been hearing, the bloodline supremacists and their group are going to be destroyed before long. Not that it has anything to do with me."

"What do you *mean*, it's got nothing to do with you?! Your family's the one getting in our way, isn't it?!"

"We're proper mages! Why are you trying to look down on us like this?!"

"It's the same for you, isn't it? You got strong because of your family's genes!"

"No, I didn't. I got there through hard work. Besides, I don't have anything to do with the faction, you know? I think my father and grandfather are working on things in secret, but I don't know myself exactly what they're doing."

"The Mage of Purgatory and the Silent Lion?!"

If *that* combo of father and son were working together, the conflict might as well be over already.

As soon as the situation had reached the point that *those* two felt the need to mobilize, the bloodline supremacists had been practically done for. There was no end of terrifying stories about each of the two men.

Leaving aside the specifics of those stories, the core of it was that they were both famous for being merciless toward anyone they considered an enemy. What was more, they were the cunning type, using all sorts of means to cover up whatever they did behind the scenes and make sure no evidence was left behind.

If the two of them were on the hunt, they must have gotten their hands on concrete evidence that would let them deal an effective, decisive blow to their

enemies.

“Th-This is bad!”

“I’m getting out of this damn faction before it’s too late!”

“I’m getting out of the academy too! I don’t want to die!”

“Um, I don’t think they’d go *that* hard on students...”

But at this point, the girls weren’t listening to what Celestina had to say. They were too busy running away at full speed.

Her relatives had no end of stories about them, each one terrifying enough to make their enemies run away in terror. You’d be hard-pressed to find many people in this country that *wouldn’t* flee with their tail between their legs if they heard someone like that was coming after them.

Now, the rumors going around about Delthasis didn’t include anything about his war against underground criminal organizations. But even what *was* known was more than enough. It had certainly gotten the job done here...

“You’re amazing. You chased them off like that just with your words...”

“No, I’m nothing special. But the way they panicked like that... What’s Grandfather been *doing*?”

Celestina was unfamiliar with the rumors about her family members. Or, rather, those rumors were actively hidden from her within the family. *Outside* the family, meanwhile, there was no one bold enough to speak ill of her father or grandfather straight to her face. It was only obvious she’d be uninformed.

Uninformed about, say, the rumor that “he burned down an entire bandit hideout, bandits and all. Every last one of them, burned to a crisp.” Or the rumor that “if there’s any noble he doesn’t like, he’ll bankrupt them and crush them.” Or that “he devised a scheme to bring a greedy merchant to financial ruin, turning the tables on them and taking over their entire business.” Or that “any suitors who try to get close to the family with ill intentions are annihilated.” And so on, and so forth. The scariest thing about these rumors was that most of them were true.

Creston was entirely willing to come out personally and burn all of his

enemies to a crisp, if he had to.

Delthasis, meanwhile, would have all sorts of machinations running simultaneously behind the scenes, and right when that got his enemies panicking, he'd slide in from the side and take everything they had. He wasn't usually the type to act personally. Or at least, that was his perception among *proper* society...

"Either way, you saved me there. And you taught me how beastfolk are meant to fight too. I've gotta thank you somehow."

"Don't worry about it. I used to be in a similar position myself, so it wasn't like it had nothing to do with me..."

"Nah, it wouldn't sit right with me if I didn't find some way to repay you."

With just the occasional exception, beastfolk had a strong sense of duty. They had a habit—a trait, perhaps—of making sure to repay any favors.

Alternatively, you could say Celestina had just about managed to *tame* the girl. Her tail was wagging vigorously from side to side.

"L-Let's see. In that case... How about forming a party with me for the weeklong combat training camp?"

"Ooh?! Are you gonna be going too, Celestina?"

"Of course I am! Um...by the way, I never caught your name. Could I ask you to introduce yourself?"

"Oh, right. I'm Ulna Raha! I'm the adopted daughter of a mage called Sergus Sephon—though as you can tell, I'm not exactly a great mage. Anyway, I owe you one. And I look forward to chatting with you!"

"Sergus... Isn't that the name of a mage from the same year as Grandfather? I think I've met him once, actually, though I got the impression that he was a bit of a difficult person to please..."

"Nah, he's fine. He's a pretty funny old guy, you know?"

Sergus and Creston were both alumni of the Istol Academy of Magic, and they'd graduated the same year. The both of them had worked hard at their studies, competing with each other to see who'd come out on top.

Sergus had always been a bit of a free spirit, uninterested in political power, and he never really got actively involved in anything. It had gotten him nicknamed “the blockhead,” and he’d ended up infamous for finding everything to be a chore.

But his talent was the real deal, and he was famous for that too.

“Anyway, that’s cool! Didn’t expect us to have a connection like that. The world seems big sometimes, but I guess it’s a small place.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t expecting us to have something like that between us!”

“Oh? When did the two of you get so close?”

Celestina and Ulna jumped at the sudden voice.

Miska had appeared out of nowhere. Who knew *what* she’d been doing this whole time?

Forget about sniffing her out; neither Ulna nor Celestina had been able to detect her presence in *any* way. You couldn’t blame them for being surprised.

She was an impressively stealthy woman.

“Milady... My poor loner of a noble lady... She’s finally... She’s finally found a friend! Why, your faithful maid here is so happy, she can’t stop her tears from welling up...”

“What do you mean, *loner*?! And you’re not actually crying at all, are you?! So why are you saying that like it’s some big thing?!”

“I’m sure your grandfather in the heavens above would be delighted to hear what has become of his granddaughter. If only he could see you now...”

“Don’t just go killing Grandfather off like that! He’s still perfectly healthy!”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right. He probably *won’t* be dying just yet... I imagine he’ll live another eighty years. He’s a stubborn one, that old man. *Tch.*”

“Miska... Do you hate my grandfather or something? It kind of sounds like you want him dead...”

“No, no; perish the thought! Why, I love him from the bottom of my heart.”

“How are you able to say that so confidently? You’ve got such a fake smile on

your face! I can't even *begin* to believe you..."

"Aha ha... Aha ha ha ha!"

Suddenly faced with this stony-faced maid and the whirlwind of chaos she'd brought with her, Ulna couldn't stop herself from keeling over with laughter. This maid—whom she'd failed to detect even with her keen beastfolk senses—was likely the same sort of individual as a certain middle-aged man and a certain duke. A true anomaly of a person, someone who went beyond the borders of species.

One way or another, though, Miska *was* happy to hear that lonely little Celestina had finally found herself someone to call a friend apart from Carosty.

By the way, it wasn't just that no one spoke to Celestina because of how much stronger she'd gotten. Some of the students had actually formed a Celestina fan club, and they were relentless in eliminating anyone who tried to get close to her.

They'd even given her a nickname: "the Magic Angel."

She was clueless about that nickname, mind you—as well as all of the eyes that were on her wherever she went.

Somewhere in the distance, a student was breathing heavily. "The Angel... She's as cute today as always!"

"That maid knows what she's doing. Was that a picture tool she was using? To record the Angel?"

"Brilliant! Let's get her to copy it later and hand out the copies to our comrades."

"Of course! Now, here's to another day of stal—I mean, *protecting* our Angel!"

"YEAH!"

It seemed like this academy was rotten in more ways than one...

Chapter 2: It Runs in the Family

Croesus was always busy lately, but he was in a good mood.

He'd cleaned up the laboratory room—which was practically doing double duty as his bedroom, at this point—and he'd been researching magic formulas as part of a group of promising young researchers from the Saint-Germain faction. What was more, that research was going swimmingly as of late.

Though that *did* mean he'd been cooped up inside the laboratory even more than usual...

In fact, Croesus's good moods almost inevitably saw him spending all his time in the laboratory. In other words, he barely ever left it—though as a result, he was getting badly out of shape.

Maybe he'd be able to solve that issue if he just did some half-hearted exercise every now and again. But Croesus was the type to devote all of his attention to one thing at a time. He wasn't fond of multitasking.

Aside from his research, there was another reason for his good mood: his relationships with his older brother and younger sister.

Croesus had always been obsessed with magic research, ever since he was a little boy. That had given him a poor view of Zweit, his much more energetic brother who'd focused far more on preparing himself to be the next duke. And figuring that Zweit would inevitably be the next head of the family, Croesus had only shut himself in all the more. As a result, the brothers had stopped seeing eye to eye—which in turn had continued to sour Croesus's opinion of his brother.

Meanwhile, the prospect of Croesus having a good relationship with his younger sister Celestina had always seemed out of the question to him. Ever since finding out she was “unable” to use magic, he'd filed her away in his mind as someone who could never be a mage, and he'd lost all interest in her. Recently, though, he'd learned Celestina had the disposition of a true

researcher, just like he did, and he'd begun to reflect on just how coldly he'd treated her over the years.

He'd actually been impressively quick to apologize. He hadn't been like Zweit, who'd lurked around corners looking suspicious and racking his brains before actually apologizing; Croesus had been very honest and up-front about it. He was, after all, a *researcher*. If he realized he'd been wrong, he had to update his beliefs. Fix his mistake.

Still, that didn't *erase* that mistake: he'd spent years ignoring his little sister, simply because he hadn't thought she was worth his time. It had been poor behavior, even for a researcher.

But he was improving his relationship with his siblings now. He'd even started to look forward to talking with them.

He remembered Zweit saying, "If you want to be efficient with your magic, you can't go wrong with looking into all its little quirks. How the hell are you meant to come up with battle tactics that revolve around magic if you don't even *understand* it?"

Then there was Celestina, who'd said, "I'm sure there must be ways to use magic for all *sorts* of different things. Not just fighting. I want to make magic that *helps* people! And perhaps some magic tools too, if I can."

The two of them were going down entirely different paths, but Croesus found himself very interested in each one's ideas for approaching magic from a certain angle. They were stimulating his mind, showing him entirely new possibilities.

He was a research nerd, through and through. The only problem was...

"Sorry to bring it up when you're in a good mood, but, uh...we've got that combat training camp next week, right? You sure you don't need to prepare a bit? Build up some stamina?"

Makarov had only asked a simple question, but it was enough to make Croesus freeze.

The young researcher had been so *happy* until just now, but that little reminder had brought everything crumbling down. He paused for a moment—and then, with an awkward, robotic motion, he swiveled his head toward

Makarov, a disgusted look on his face.

“Why? Why would you say that? Just when I’d managed to forget all about it...”

“*Don’t* forget about it! You’ve gotta go, whether you want to or not, right? Besides, forget about it all you want; it won’t change reality.”

“Sooo, Croesus—you got everything ready yet~? Not sure you can trust the gear the academy hands out...”

“C’mon, Yi Ling... There’s no way he’s been getting ready. You know how useless he is when it comes to anything that isn’t research.”

It was a harsh way of putting it, but it wasn’t exactly wrong.

The gap between Croesus’s appearance and his personality was huge. He was tall, with beautiful features, silver hair, and a brilliant mind...but he was also terribly unathletic, and a complete slob. If Yi Ling weren’t around to devote herself to taking care of him, his dorm room would be transformed into a garbage bin in a matter of days.

People around him tended to project onto him because of how he looked, but the *real* Croesus was a mess of a person when it came to anything outside of research. He fell far short of his two siblings in that regard.

Surprisingly enough, Zweit was the type to keep things clean—you could even call him a clean freak. And Celestina was quite the minimalist.

Her room was so spartan, so devoid of girlishness, that it seemed somehow *wrong* for a girl her age. There wasn’t a single stuffed toy in sight.

In fact, her room was so empty and desolate that Miska—unable to bear the sight of it—was in the habit of decorating it with flowers to help fill the void.

Things *had* started to change a bit lately, though. Celestina’s historically empty room had started to fill up with pots full of ores and medicinal herbs; it wouldn’t be long before it fully transformed into a researcher’s den. Still, there was zero chance of it ending up anything like the overflowing dumpster that was *Croesus’s* room.

“How many servants have run away from you this month alone? How do you

even *get* your room so filled up with crap just one day after it's been cleaned? I don't *understand!*"

"Well, you ask that, but...I'm not quite sure. My best guess is, from memory, I had a string of all-nighters mixing together medicinal herbs and the like in my experiments. So perhaps it was from that. But...I'm a *researcher*! Is it really that strange for me to have a little clutter around?"

"What do you mean, 'a little clutter'?! Your room stinks so bad I can smell it from my own room next door! Hell, I woke up one morning to find myself in the nurse's office. What did you even do?!"

"I can't remember either. When I woke up that day, I was on the ground in the dormitory courtyard. Really, I don't know *what* happened..."

"Make your damn potions in the *lab*!"

To be clear, Croesus had been prototyping a healing potion that would work against mental magic. But it had caused a horrible smell to fill his room—forcing him to evacuate to the courtyard, where he'd then promptly lost consciousness.

The strangely colored fumes from the potion had then wafted throughout the dorms, causing Makarov, who was in the next room over, to faint on the spot. But he was one of the lucky ones. Just a little farther from the disaster zone, the students affected had stayed conscious but been sent into bouts of crazed behavior, turning the dorms into bedlam.

Some of the students had started laughing nonstop like they'd gone insane, while others had stripped naked where they stood—and those were the *minor* cases. Some had done things so terrifying that you'd hesitate to put them into words, while others yet had gotten into heated discussions over the difference between "gay men" and "BL"; it had worked a little differently on everyone.

Those who had come to the aid of the victims, meanwhile, said, "It was hell. Pure hell. Just...*dreadful*. I never knew people could *get* like that. I wish I could delete it from my memory. It feels like just *thinking* about it again could make me lose my mind..."

But Croesus was the sort of person who'd see a warning label that said, *It's dangerous to mix these things together! Don't do it!* and go right ahead and mix

them.

What *can* be said without going into too much detail is that the scene the rescue squad had witnessed was such a mental health hazard that you'd need to censor the whole thing before showing it to anyone.

It wasn't the sort of content sane minds should be exposed to.

"I *can* remember there was something I really wanted to test out, and I couldn't stop myself from testing it... I'm *very* interested to find out what effect it had, though. Sadly, I don't remember it in the slightest."

"You know, I was curious too, so I asked, but... Apparently the relief squad who turned up just about went insane on the spot. All I know is, you must have made something terrifying."

"It feels like you're going to end up destroying the whole country someday, Croesus..."

"C'mon, Serina~! Even *Croesus* wouldn't go that far... I think. I hope..."

Among his companions, Croesus had a reputation as a real troublemaker.

His mind was too brilliant for his own good. There was never any telling *what* he'd do next—though it was safe to say that however he screwed up, it'd come at the expense of those around him.

He didn't have any malicious intent, but that almost made it all the worse. And for whatever reason, his victims were often left with absolutely no memory of whatever had happened. If he was doing it all on purpose, delighting in the harm he was causing, then he could've been subject to the full force of the law. But so far, every incident had just been filed away as an unfortunate accident.

Regardless, whatever it was Croesus had unleashed upon the dorms, it had been gone without a trace by the next day. Not a speck of evidence had remained, leaving it a mystery as to what, exactly, he'd created.

"Anyway, Croesus, back to the topic—what *are* you going to do about your gear for the camp~?"

Croesus sighed. "I suppose I'll have to borrow a spare set from my brother."

"You *seriously* think that's a good idea, man? The last set of gear I lent you

ended up rusty and moldy a month later. You're lucky that was mine—if it were your brother's, you woulda gotten beaten up bad."

"I think Makarov makes a good point. The two of you are related by blood, so I don't expect he'd hold back against you."

"Croesus... You really should keep things tidier, okaaay~?"

Croesus couldn't even think of an excuse. He *did* remember something along those lines happening.

He had a bad habit of taking his sweet time to return things he borrowed. And sometimes, the owner would get their item back only to find out it'd been badly damaged in some way.

Croesus usually took a while to remember he'd even borrowed something in the first place, and by the time he *did* remember and find it, it tended to be far too late—in more ways than one. Sometimes, the things he borrowed would just vanish entirely.

One time, Celestina's friend Carosty had come to his room, only to let out a shriek the moment she opened the door and faint right then and there.

To this day, no one knew what she'd seen, and the girl herself had forgotten about the incident completely.

But she'd never visited Croesus's room again.

"What'd Caro even *see*? I swear... It's *your* room, Croesus—you've really got no idea what you might've had laying around?"

"To tell you the truth, I was sleeping *here* that night. I didn't get back to the dormitory until a while later."

"Whenever poor Caro tries to go see you now, she suddenly starts trembling—and then she ends up *crying*, you know? Bet she saw something reeeaaal scary in there..."

"Say, Croesus... You're not making a *homunculus* in there, are you? A really dangerous one or something? Apparently people have heard voices from your room saying things like 'Someday, I'm gonna be a real boy!'"

"*What?! If... If that's the case, are we already too late?! Did you already make*

something?!”

“I don’t remember that. Surely I wouldn’t have made anything like that...”

Croesus von Solistia, seventeen years old, was mysterious in an entirely different way than his father. And a dangerous individual, at that—though he didn’t see himself as such.

His bedroom was a true den of putrescence. There was no knowing *what* kind of life-forms could be created there.

Oh—and for reference, the creation of life was banned under international agreements.

*

It had happened about two months earlier, late one night during the academy’s summer break, in a certain dormitory room...

Croesus, the room’s owner, was absent, having once again fallen asleep in the laboratory.

And in his pitch-black bedroom, curtains pulled shut, a strange, unknown creature was showing its first signs of life.

The slimy *substance* writhed about in the darkness as it crawled out of the bottle it was in. It was seeking freedom. Beginning to act.

It pulsed eerily—and then, gradually, began to transform from an amorphous blob to a proper body.

It was almost as if an insect within its chrysalis were morphing into what it was always meant to be. Or perhaps it was like watching a time-lapse of a species’ evolution. An evolution from a single-celled organism right through to some kind of *something* made up of countless somatic cells...

Eventually, the slime coalesced into a humanoid form. But the *specifics* of that form were nothing but grotesque.

It opened the window with both arms, each ending in three digits, and took off into the night, disappearing to who knew where. The one and only person who saw the creature would remember nothing but its long tail.

No one knew what the creature was. Perhaps there was nothing *to* know.

Tales of the thing would only ever be mentioned occasionally, as urban legends, in a corner of town...

Fast-forward to the present again, and the mysterious creature was hidden deep in the underground sewers, letting out an alien screech:

KSHAAAAAARGH!

The thing's creator remained blissfully unaware of its existence—and he'd completely forgotten how it had even been made.

And so it was all consigned to the annals of obscurity. An entire *life-form* had somehow been created by accident, and yet creature and incident alike had disappeared into the void of night.

*

Having been raked over the coals by his friends in the laboratory, Croesus went off to see Zweit. Makarov had decided to go with him.

The two of them had eventually managed to find Zweit and tell him about the situation. However...

"Anyway, that's the spot I'm in. So I'd like to borrow a set of gear from you, if I cou—"

"*Hell* no! Did you seriously think I'd lend you anything after hearing *that*?! You got some real nerve, huh?!"

Croesus had come here, a faint light of hope burning in his heart, his head bowed—okay, well, he hadn't *quite* bowed, but he'd asked in earnest—to borrow some equipment from Zweit. He'd figured he might as well ask, but he'd been expecting to get shot down, and that was exactly what had happened.

Which was really his own fault.

They were all in the library right now, by the way, together with Zweit's friend Diio.

Diio—as you might expect—had come here in the hope of building a friendship with Celestina, his first love. But he hadn't taken into account that

pesky little love-related ailment that could occur in this world.

Back to the topic, though, Croesus had failed in his mission. Of course he had. If you loaned something to a slob like him, you had no way of knowing when you might get it back. Or whether you'd even get it back at all.

It almost took *talent* to be this bad with things you borrowed. In the past, he'd forgotten to return them, or lost them, or broken them, or thrown them out, or had them stolen away by some unknown creature; it wasn't just a double-whammy of incidents, but a *quintuple*-whammy.

"Loaning" something to Croesus was practically the same as gifting it to him.

"What happened to your *own* armor, anyway? I swear you got a set made around the same time as my last one..."

"I managed to excavate it, but it was completely ruined. Even at first glance, the metal parts were entirely rusted, and the leather parts looked like they'd been eaten by something..."

"What do you mean, you 'excavated' it?! And...it'd been *eaten*?! The academy's got stuff in place to make sure rats and things can't get in here! What could've eaten it?!"

"Who knows? Whatever it was, it must have had some sharp teeth, given the marks on what was left. Oh, and there were also signs that parts of it had been melted with some kind of powerful acid..."

"Are you keeping some kinda crazy pet in your dorm room or what? That definitely doesn't sound like any rat *I've* heard of before."

Croesus and Zweit had never really had much to do with each other until recently. It was nice that they'd had more chances to talk with each other as of late, but the more Zweit came to learn about his brother, the more he found him to be mysterious. *Dangerous*.

It was Zweit's first time hearing that his brother had been constantly carrying out strange experiments in the middle of a dormitory filled with students.

The knowledge left Zweit wanting to cradle his head in his hands. Or, rather, he already *was*.

“See? I *told* you you’d have no chance...”

“Hey, Macaron. Keep an eye on him, please. I don’t have a clue what he’s gonna try next.”

“Who’s *Macaron*?! Besides, *you’re* his brother—shouldn’t it be *your* job to watch over a troublemaker like him?!”

“No way. I’ve got no chance at handling him.”

“Don’t just shove your brother onto me because he’s too much of a pain for you to deal with!”

As Zweit and Makarov bickered, Croesus, entirely unperturbed, was thinking to himself, *Oh? If I can’t find myself a set of gear, then...perhaps I won’t be forced to go on this excursion thing after all!* At least he was looking on the bright side.

In reality, though, the academy wasn’t that lenient with its events. If he had no gear, he’d just be placed in the rear to provide support; he’d still have to take part, one way or another. Some things were too good to be true.

“Looks like you’re the same as ever, huh, Croesus...? You’ll have to take part in the combat training camp either way, though. The top-ranking students don’t get a choice.”

“I...I suppose... I might not be able to get my way on this one. And, um, sorry, you were...Wally, was it?”

“No! It was *not*! My name’s Diio! We’ve been in the same year since middle school! Have you seriously forgotten me?!”

“Ahhh... So *that* was your name. Sorry for forgetting. As an apology, let me give you this stone mask. If you put a bit of your blood on it, these strange tendrils come out of it. Really, it’s *quite* the interesting little thing...”

“I don’t want it! Why do you even *have* something as suspicious as that?!”

“I just happened to buy it at a flea market. I don’t know exactly what it’s meant to be used for, though. How about you put it on and try it out?”

“Are— Are you just trying to use me for a human experiment?!”

Croesus was a bit of a collector. It wasn't uncommon for him to end up buying something weird when he went out to town.

In particular, he'd bought up a mass of magic tools over the years, intending to research them all one day. But that day had yet to come, and so they were all just piled up in his dorm room.

That was what had led to the creation of Croesus's den of putrescence. And by then carrying out experiment after experiment in what was practically a storage room, making magic potions and all sorts of other things, Croesus had completed his own little hazard site.

The odd part about it was that Croesus himself seemed to have no qualms whatsoever about sleeping in that room. Or at least, if he *did* think anything about the state of the place, it was nothing more than *well, well, I have made a bit of a mess in here, haven't I?* He did nothing more than try to gloss over it with platitudes like that; never did he *think* of actually cleaning it up.

The suspicious mask he'd handed Diio was one of the many things that had been slumbering in his garbage heap of a room.

Two of the young men turned to Croesus. "Why does it sound like you're not even worried about getting this armor?!"

"Well, I thought, if I'm just standing by on alert at the back, I might not actually *need* any equipment..."

"That's ridiculous! What if monsters attack us from behind?!"

"Yeah, Croesus... Why do you assume everything's just going to work out smoothly for you? How about you think about what your poor friend Whackaloff has to deal with?"

"My *name* is MAKAROV! You only got a single syllable right!"

"C'mon, don't sweat the small stuff."

"It's not *small stuff*! We're in the same year! We were classmates! Right?!"

"I swear, *both* of these brothers are as bad as each other when it comes to remembering names..."

Diio let out a deep sigh.

Neither Croesus nor Zweit had any intent of remembering the names of people they weren't interested in. They'd remember them if they *had* to, but it only took them a short while without seeing the person in question to completely forget again.

Diio figured that once the dispute in the Wiesler faction came to an end, whenever that was, Zweit would even forget *Samtrol* before long.

It was almost *refreshing* to meet people like that.

Fortunately, there were no other students in the library to be bothered by the group's endless bickering. But that didn't stop the librarians from giving them a nasty glare.

It was a troublesome group of students that had come together there—and they were nowhere near finished with their loud arguing.

*

As the Solistia brothers argued with each other, their sister Celestina was teaching Ulna magic at the academy's training ground.

That said, beastfolk could only etch so many magic formulas into their subconscious. So if they wanted Ulna to be an effective mage, Celestina would have to choose spells that were a good fit for her.

After seeing what Ulna was capable of at the training ground just now, Celestina had decided to teach her spells suited to use in hand-to-hand combat.

"After thinking about it for a while, I've decided you should probably learn Mana Shield, Air Field, and Hawk Eye."

"Why those three? I thought I was going to be focusing on hand-to-hand combat?"

"If you attach Mana Shields to your arms and legs, you can turn your whole body into a weapon. Air Field helps to protect you from long-range attacks, and Hawk Eye lets you spot your enemies before they spot you."

"You can use shield magic as a weapon?"

"Would you like to give it a try?"

Celestina conjured Divine Silver Barricades attached to her arms and formed them into sharp blades. Then she sent a downward slash toward a target dummy that was set up on the training ground.

The dummy was split cleanly in half, and the old plate armor it had been wearing dropped to the ground with a *clang*. The other students around were dumbstruck, clueless as to what had just happened.

Shield magic was surprisingly versatile. It could actually be applied to weapons or spells, boosting their offensive power and durability alike; that was a perfectly valid use. You could even say that most buff magic was just shield magic that had had certain formula components incorporated to make it more convenient to use. But unfortunately for Ulna, she wasn't talented enough to cast buff magic. Her beastfolk blood meant that she was only able to cast simple spells.

That was why Celestina was teaching her shield magic. Just by covering your arms with it, you could boost the power of your strikes. Add that to Ulna's existing strength, and she'd get some serious firepower.

Of course, that all came with a condition: the shield would only last as long as she had the mana to keep it up. But it was effective, and a novel approach. So novel, in fact, that the onlookers scattered around the training ground were lost for words.

"That's what shield magic can do. If you cover your arms with it like that, you should have quite a strong weapon in your arsenal! Now, I can't actually teach you the specific spell I used just then, but you should be able to do something similar with regular defensive magic."

"Whoa! I never woulda thought you could do something like *that* with just barrier magic!"

"Between barrier magic and your natural physical strength as a beastfolk, I think you'll be able to deal some powerful blows. And if you have a weapon as well, that should be enough for you to defeat most monsters you'll find out there. Remember, though—it's dangerous to get too confident. You'll still be in trouble if you get surrounded."

"Ah, yeah... And I guess I've never been in a proper fight, huh? Just a little

brawl here and there, if anything. Makes sense I wouldn't be a great fighter yet..."

Now that Ulna knew what to do, it was time for her magic training to begin. Frankly, she'd never been a great student.

If she didn't do well in the upcoming training camp, she was in danger of being held back a year. But she was practically an amateur when it came to proper combat. Even if she devoted herself to self-defense training now, Celestina wasn't sure she'd be able to get good enough in time.

Still, starting now was better than never. Every little bit of training that'd help keep her safe in a dangerous situation was worth doing.

Ulna wasn't going to be using Zelos's magic formulas, but rather ones that Celestina herself had optimized during the course of her own magic research. Celestina's family was selling the spell scrolls Zelos had improved, after all; she couldn't just go handing them out for free. On the other hand, the baseline formulas provided by the academy were difficult to even *activate* for Ulna, a half-beastfolk who took more strongly after her beastfolk side.

There was also the beastfolk's special skill, Bestialization...but that put a big burden on both the user's body and their mana, so she couldn't just use it willy-nilly. So it would be important for Ulna to get as many cards up her sleeve as possible before the big event.

Explanation complete, Ulna etched the magic formulas into her subconscious and wasted no time casting the first spell.

"Uh... *Mana, make me a barrier to protect me from my foes. Mana Shield!*"

As Ulna cast the spell, a barrier made of mana formed around her body.

This version of the spell—reconstructed by Celestina with references to Zelos's version—wasn't perfect, but even Ulna had no problems casting it. It wasn't quite as mana-efficient as Zelos's, and it was a little harder to get the hang of, but it was just enough to be perfect for training up your mana pool and learning the Mana Control skill.

Celestina herself wasn't sure she'd done that well at modifying it. But judging by the results, she'd done an *excellent* job.

“Now, imagine that barrier converging around your arms. If that’s too hard for now, you can start with some mana control drills instead.”

“All right. I’ll give it a shot... Huh. This...takes a bit of effort, huh?”

“Hmm? A *bit*...?”

The magic barrier around Ulna’s body started to gradually converge on her arms, where it condensed to cover them completely. She’d been terrifyingly quick for her first time manipulating mana like this.

Celestina could do the same thing...at this point. But that was only because she’d toiled away practicing it for two months—she’d even made sure to keep up her mana control practice after returning to the academy. And she *still* wasn’t able to do it this quickly.

Yet Ulna had done it as if it were a simple little task. And she’d done it with no background knowledge and unusual precision.

This was what the beastfolk’s innate talents could do. They excelled at making efficient use of what little mana they had; they had an instinctive knack for minimizing their mana consumption. Pair that with a magic formula that had been optimized for mana efficiency, and Ulna was doing just fine. She was making use of the mana from nature too, which also helped a lot.

In other words, while beastfolk had less mana than humans, they had a talent from birth for *controlling* that mana—a talent that far outstripped that of every other species. If the beastfolk *had* possessed as much mana as humans, they would’ve been superior to humans in virtually every way. It was enough to invoke envy in someone like Celestina, who’d desperately toiled away at practicing her mana control.

Mana had formed into translucent layers over Ulna’s arms now, and she clenched her fists, then relaxed them again, to get a feel for it. She was completely unaware of how impressive a thing she’d just done.

Celestina was still a little bewildered. But for now, at least, she decided to have Ulna test her might against one of the target dummies on the training ground.

“W-Well then. Let’s see how strong that’s made you.”

“Kaaay~! ♪ You just want me to hit the dummy, right?”

“Yes. If possible, I’d like you to try and strengthen your body as well so that we can see what effect that has. It’s just that—”

“Right, then—here I go!”

“Ah—”

Before Celestina could finish speaking, Ulna strengthened her body all of a sudden, dashed toward a target dummy, and struck it with all her might, using an arm clad with a barrier of mana.

The beastfolk’s ability to strengthen their bodies was tremendous. And it showed: the target dummy was obliterated. Broken into smithereens.

The sheer impact left every onlooker with their mouth agape, speechless.

Like Celestina before her, Ulna had been famous as a failure throughout the academy; the other students had never had a particularly good view of her. But just now, she’d smashed that reputation into pieces along with the target dummy.

“That was great, Miss Celestina! I didn’t think it’d be *that* strong!”

“H-Huh? Oh... Yes. Neither did I, to be honest. I certainly wasn’t expecting you to get the hang of it so quickly...”

“Guess I’ll be able to take out just about any monster we find in one hit now, huh?”

“It’s always using up your mana while you have it out, so it’s probably best to save it as a trump card. Even just standing there now, it should be draining your mana.”

“Oh—you’re right. Actually, now that you mention it, I’m getting kinda dizzy...”

“Quick! Release the magic! You’ll collapse!”

It seemed like combining shield magic with body strengthening placed a fair burden on the user.

It was all well and good to train and learn how to use magic, but it looked like

Ulna's level was simply too low for her to master it yet. Her mana had been used up in no time at all. She'd have to level up if she wanted to be effective at multitasking like that.

"Keep practicing your mana control, and try to level up while we're on the camp. If you don't improve, you'll end up burning through all of your mana and collapsing in an instant..."

"So *this* is how it feels to run out of mana... It's the first time I've experienced it. Aha ha ha!"

"Sorry to interrupt the two of you while you're having fun chatting."

"*Hywhah?!*" Both girls were shocked.

A coolheaded beauty of a maid had suddenly appeared behind them.

She really *was* good at hiding her presence—neither of them had noticed her there in the slightest. She was suddenly just *standing* there behind them—like she was doing a finishing move or something—and she was in a weird pose that looked like it'd hurt her joints, all with a satisfied look on her face.

It gave the vibe that she could pull something out from behind her back at any moment.

"M-Miska? Please don't scare me like that."

"I couldn't tell you were there. Again. Not even by smell..."

"I *do* make sure to apply deodorant every morning. More importantly, milady—you have a letter from your grandfather."

"From Grandfather?"

As Celestina took the letter from Miska's hands, she noticed that the seal seemed to have already been broken; the letter practically fell out of it. As soon as she opened the envelope, she sent Miska a distrustful look.

"Miska... Surely you haven't read this letter yourself, have you?"

"Why, of course I have. I was worried it might be an unpleasant letter to the effect of, *Woe is me! I'm so lonely! So lonely I might just die!* Not that that would be anything new, I suppose. Perhaps it's too late for me to start worrying

about that.”

“Miska... Are you sure you don’t just hate Grandfather?”

“Perish the thought, milady. I love him with all my heart. More than anyone else in the world...or so I assume.”

“Why did you suddenly get uncertain at the end there?”

There was a lot that Celestina wanted to say, but for now, she decided to read the letter. And...it seemed like Miska’s “worry” had been warranted.

This was the sort of stuff that no man his age should be writing, and it filled a full three pages. Then, right at the end, there was something very important written as if it were just there for good measure. Something that really seemed like it should’ve been the main topic—and yet there was next to no detail about it.

All the letter said about it was this: *Lastly, Sir Zelos has said he’ll be joining your combat training camp as a guard. But I wanted to go! Why can’t I?! Boo-hoo...*

Celestina crumpled to the ground.

“Milady, that is a rather uncouth look.”

“Grandfather... Why did you just gloss over the most important part? Anyway, I can’t simply ignore this. I’ll have to inform my brothers...”

“Sir Zweit is in the library. Feel free to go now and tell him of the news; I shall take over here and fluff—I mean, *take care of* Miss Ulna.”

“Thanks. I have to hurry!”

“W-Wait... Miss Celestina? Your maid scares me...”

“Fear not. I am not scary in the slightest. It will all be over in a moment, I promise... Heh heh.”

It should go without saying that screams could be heard from the training ground before long.

By the time it was over, Ulna’s furry tail had been thoroughly fluffed.

“So to sum things up,” continued Zweit, “I’ll bring the materials, and Croesus can use them to fix his armor. He should still be able to finish in time.”

“Yeah, I guess that *is* the only option... But is it really going to be okay to leave the materials with Croesus?”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll just keep them for himself without even *trying* to repair the armor. I mean...it’s Croesus we’re talking about, right?”

“I *can* see that happening...”

“Oh, *I* see. So *that’s* how the three of you view me. I swear, the nerve of you! I’d *never* do something like—like that.”

The three responded as one: “You liar! What was that pause just now?!”

The same group was still in the library, in another uproar over Croesus’s armor.

If there were going to be monster materials available, Croesus probably *would* go into a frenzy over them.

Especially seeing as the materials Zweit would be providing were from monsters that lived in the Far-Flung Green Depths. There was no doubt about it: Croesus would just take them and try to use them to make a potion, without even *attempting* to do anything about his armor.

Croesus drew no lines when it came to magic.

“You all really have no trust in me, do you? I *do* still have my wits about me, I’ll have you know! I’d never do something like that when I’m in such a tough spot.”

“*Really?* Even if we handed you something like a chimera stinger?”

“A chimera stinger?! You have one?! Sell it to me, *please*! I’ll pay you! Right now! Come on! Hurry up!”

“See?! You did it right away! What happened to having your wits about you?!”

“I knew it’d turn out like this. Croesus is always going to be Croesus...”

Croesus’s materialistic desires knew no end.

“You *really* think it’d be a good idea to leave a stinger lying around in your trash heap of a room?! If you forget it’s there and step on it, you’ll *die*!”

“But wouldn’t that be the ultimate way for a researcher to die? Why, I could imagine no better way to leave this life behind. Just *think* about it...finally having the chance to find out how a chimera’s poison feels as you leave this mortal coil!”

“Okay. His head isn’t screwed on right.”

“He looks so calm and collected, and then on the inside he’s like...that. It’s a shame.”

Zweit, Makarov, and Diio didn’t know how to feel about the fact that a useless guy like Croesus was so popular. The world, they thought, could be an unfair place...

That was when Celestina came into the room at full pelt, gasping for air and calling out for Zweit.

“Brother!”

There wasn’t really any reason for her to be in this much of a hurry. But she had a lot of respect for Zelos, and it seemed like she could get a little carried away when he was involved.

“Celestina? What’s up? Why are you so out of breath?”

“M-Master is... He’s coming with...”

The four young men responded with a simultaneous “Huh?”

“I was told he’s going to join us at the combat training camp! As a guard!”

The air in the room froze over.

The “Master” that Celestina was talking about was Zelos. But the only ones who *knew* him were his two students—Zweit and Celestina herself. The others knew little about who he really was.

“Her...‘Master’? Is that the guy you call Teach? The one who taught your sister how to decipher magic formulas?”

“Ah... Yeah. He’s a mage. Fights with his fists sometimes, though.”

“What kind of mage is *that*...? I know there are some weird mages out there, but...”

“Oh... *Oh!* Celestina! Is this... Is this a dream?” One of the group seemed to have fallen victim to a certain ailment of love.

But Croesus and Makarov, at least, had heard some things about the mage who’d taught Zweit and Celestina. And now, it seemed like he’d be taking part in the combat training camp.



“Who set it up? Dad? If it was, then...I’m starting to think something suspicious is gonna happen on this trip.”

“Why do you say that? Couldn’t it just be that he was running low on money and thought he’d make some by working as a mercenary for a while?”

“Teach has plenty of ways to make money. He wouldn’t have to take on some basic job like this. Let me ask—could *you* take on seven wyverns alone? And *win*?”

“Of course not. I’d be digging my own grave.”

“Right? Then there are only so many reasons he could be coming. Probably to guard me, I’d guess? Maybe those bloodline supremacist bastards are planning something...”

All of a sudden, Zweit looked far more serious than he had just moments ago.

He’d heard rumors that Samtrol—who controlled about half the Wiesler faction at this point—had ties with people from the underworld.

Zweit also knew that his father, Delthasis, had his own secret intelligence network. So it didn’t take him long to put two and two together and assume that Samtrol had found himself caught up in that network.

“Is it possible that he’s just decided to come and see how we’re doing without giving us any warning?”

“I guess that *is* an option too, knowing him...”

“*Ahem!* Z-Zweit...”

“Oh.”

Looking at Diio behaving suspiciously next to him, Zweit got the idea of what his friend was hinting at.

He would’ve preferred to have nothing to do with it...but at the same time, he could tell he really didn’t have a choice. And so, reluctantly, he decided to introduce his friend to Celestina. After all, if he *didn’t*, the guy would only keep bugging him about it day after day.

“Celestina, this is my friend I was telling you about the other day. And the guy

with the short blond hair is Croesus's friend."

"Oh—sorry for not greeting you. I've heard about the two of you from my brothers. I believe your names were...Debongo Boglo and Makkory Pervanis?"

"*She's* getting our names wrong too?! And where'd those names even come from?!"

Each of the three Solistia siblings was going their own way in life, but they all had the same habit of forgetting the names of people they weren't interested in.

And so Diio became aware that Celestina saw him as "someone she wasn't interested in."

Diio and Makarov had hoped that at least *she* would be decent. But apparently, it ran in the family...

Afterward, Diio somehow got her to remember his name. That alone was enough to have him practically jumping for joy—which, in turn, left Zweit rather exasperated with him...

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"Hmph. So a *worm* has finally found his way to Tina, has he...? Heh heh heh..."

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"Grah hah hah... It's obvious, is it not? We *burn him to a crisp*. Yes, yes..."

"I...humbly request that you not get me involved in this. I would strongly appreciate it if you took full responsibility for this yourself."

"Pah! All will be fine as long as we're not found out, good Dandis. Though, yes—we will have to make *certain* we are not found out..."

A certain crazy old man—Creston, to be precise—had started to make his move.

He could look crazy enough at the best of times. Now, though, he was worse than usual—painstakingly sharpening a knife, and with a savage grin on his face to boot.

Diio's fate was up in the air.

His only objective: staying alive.

Chapter 3: The Old Guy Gets Seasick

Dressed in a jet-black robe, Zelos was getting ready for the guard job he'd agreed to do.

He'd be boarding a ship in a few hours' time. First, though, he wanted to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything—and after a while, he realized there *was*, in fact, something fairly important. He went back to his bedroom, picked up a certain something from the table, and slowly put it over his face. It was a mask, and a pretty elaborate one at that.

It only covered his eyes, and it had a weirdly chuunibyou design, modeled after an oni. But it was still a proper magic tool, and it worked together with the rings he'd made for his students. Specifically, it was capable of showing him a simple arrow that pointed in the direction of whoever was wearing the rings.

Now, the mask *would* help him to hide his identity. Though, when its design was only going to make him stand out all the more, it seemed kind of like he was putting the cart before the horse...

Regardless, the only issue left now was the motorbike Zelos had made. Three days ago, the brakes had stopped working and the bike had gone haywire. He *had* built in a way of bringing it to a stop, but it had failed while he'd been riding, and he'd gotten into an accident not long after noticing what had happened.

The failure had been caused by a combination of improper brake cable layout and a lack of durability in the housing that protected the motorbike's transmission. And since Zelos hadn't fitted the bike with a key mechanism to start it up, those brakes were the only real way he'd had of bringing it to a stop. He'd been left with no way of powering the thing down in the case of an emergency.

When Zelos had hit the orc king with his bike, a shard from a broken longsword had severed his brake cable. It had pierced the housing and gotten caught in the transmission too, preventing the bike from decelerating.

It hadn't been helped by the fact that the bike was automatic—but at least Zelos had improved it by now. He'd been sorely reminded of the dangers of half-assing things.

"I sure wasn't expecting an orc king to pop up there... Guess I should never have made the powertrain out of lead and tin. Still, though...you wouldn't usually expect the front *and* rear brakes to both stop working at the same time, would you? Was I just unlucky?"

Motorbikes weren't designed to come to a sudden stop—and crashing into an orc king was even worse. It shouldn't have been a surprise that something failed. Still, the specifics of *what* had failed, all at once, did indeed come down to a lot of bad luck.

Either way, that was all in the past now, and it was Zelos's job as the engineer to make sure an accident like that wouldn't happen again. The root cause of the accident was that Zelos had assembled the bike as a rush job since he'd been so busy with his other preparations. That was a mistake—and if he didn't learn from it, it was a mistake he was liable to repeat at some point in the future.

Fortunately, no one had died, but there was no guarantee that that'd be the case next time.

Sighing as he realized he'd added another chapter to his dark past, Zelos removed the mask and stored it away in his inventory.

"Hey, geezer. You ready yet?"

"Just about good to go. All I need to do now is put *this* thing into storage."

"Hmm. What's up with the weird magic tool?"

"Are you seriously gonna take that bike with you, Mister? You sure that's a good idea? Weren't you saying you lost control of it the other day?"

The female mercenary party—Iris, Jeanne, and Lena—had come to see how Zelos was doing.

Iris's expression grew stiff as soon as she saw the motorbike standing near the entrance. She'd already been wary of the thing, and it seemed like hearing about Zelos's incident from the other day had only made it worse.

Jeanne, for her part, looked a little bit curious, while Lena didn't seem all that interested. Looking at the latter of the two made Zelos feel like he was forgetting about something...but he decided not to worry about it for now.

"It looks like you...*ride* on it? But, what, can you only fit one person on it?"

"Don't worry about that. I have something in mind."

"Mister, don't tell me...you're gonna fit a sidecar to each side or something?"

"No, no. It wouldn't be able to turn properly if I did that. Swing arms can only get you so far. Anyway, well... You'll see what I have in mind when we get there."

"But, Zelos, you were saying this thing went out of control the other day, weren't you?"

Lena was making a fair point. Zelos had already improved the motorbike since then, though.

Since he'd had to spend these past few days fixing the safety issues with his bike—the Harley-Sanders Model 13, as he'd named it—he'd needed to come up with a pretty simple alternative for taking Iris and the others along for the ride. Still, at least the bike was far safer now.

"Still, I'm amazed you were able to make this in just three days, Mister. Uh... Mister?"

Zelos had an awkward expression on his face, and he sounded a little hesitant as he responded to Iris.

"Well, Iris... Leaving aside a few parts here and there, do you really think I'd be able to build an entire bike in just three days?"

"Huh? I mean, it's right here in front of us, so..."

"You know that one company that makes those battery-powered race cars? The toy ones that zoom in circles around a little track?"

"Yeah. My dad and my younger brother used to go pretty often to a toy shop nearby and— Wait. Seriously?"

"Seriously. All of the intricate little parts—the frame, the automatic

transmission, the suspension, the brakes, all that stuff—*those* aren't too different from those in the motorbikes you'd know. Even if they're just cheap imitations. The real problems were the powertrain and the drivetrain, though, so for those I kind of just...copied the ones from those toys. Essentially, I just changed them from being powered by electricity to being powered by mana."

Zelos's Harley-Sanders might have *looked* like a proper motorbike, but on the inside, it was the same as those four-wheel-drive toy cars.

It ran off a mana-powered motor, and the mana tank wasn't much different from a battery. The transmission, the throttle, and the brakes were just about the only proper *bike* parts for now. The internals had practically come straight out of a toy.

Usually, if you were going to the trouble of building a motorbike, building one that was powered by electricity would let you drastically cut down on the time needed for production, and it'd simplify the design. However, Zelos had gotten so carried away with automating the bulk of the controls that he'd forgotten to make sure it was durable. And his emphasis on minimizing its weight had left certain parts particularly fragile.

The strongest part of the bike was...its *fire-control system*. It was a ridiculous design choice.

At the end of the day, Zelos lived for his hobbies.

"Couldn't you have just made it a car, then?"

"We're going to be in a forest. Surrounded by trees. A car wouldn't have a small enough turning radius. We'd be limited in where we could go, and it'd take longer to get to anyone we're trying to save. A bike's perfect in that regard—though I did have to simplify the design since we didn't have much time. I'll tinker with it some more and get it all perfect once we're back."

"It looks like there's something like an engine too. What's that?"

"Oh—that *looks* like an engine, but it's actually an assembly of magic tools on the inside. They mostly work as a simple control system. The part with the transmission ended up pretty fragile at first, but...well, it's safe enough now. Don't worry about it."

In short, he'd splurged a huge amount of incredibly precious materials to make what was essentially a big toy you could ride on.

Apart from that, the motorbike was able to deploy a magic barrier around it, and it could link up with Zelos's mask to let it attack, to some extent. Any parts Zelos had lacked when building the bike, he'd just gotten by reappropriating some magic tools he'd already had on hand, so it hadn't taken him too long.

Regardless, the fact that he'd used up things as precious as rare metals and even dragon materials on this meant that it was hard to justify as anything but a waste.

"Guess you're a proper mage too, huh, Iris? I've got no *clue* what you're talking about over there!"

"I was going to say the same! I can't quite understand what you're saying, but from all the technical terms you're understanding, it's clear you must be an amazing mage."



The discussion between Zelos and Iris would have just been an everyday conversation back on Earth, but it was completely incomprehensible to Jeanne and Lena, who'd grown up in *this* world. To the two mercenary women, it seemed like the reincarnators must be using some kind of obscure technical terminology that only mages knew—and the fact that Iris seemingly understood it all was making their impressions of her skyrocket. Though of course, it wasn't actually that impressive, given the context.

To anyone not from Earth, listening to Zelos and Iris talk right now was like listening to a discussion between aliens.

It had also been decided that three of Zelos's birds—Ukei, Zankei, and Senkei—would accompany him on the job. And it seemed like they were taking the whole thing at their own pace.

“Bo-caw! Cakakah!” (“An expedition, is it? My wings are buzzing with excitement.”)

“Cocca ba-keko!” (“We are to be *guards*. Escorts. Forget not our purpose.”)

“Bok... Kukaw.” (“Anything works for me. As long as we can test out our new skills.”)

The other coccos had wanted to join as well, but as you might expect, Zelos was reluctant to leave his home entirely unattended. And those coccos were specialized in fighting as a group, which would've drawn a ridiculous amount of attention.

Zelos *was* thinking of taking them all to the Far-Flung Green Depths at some point. But as they were now, they were still more likely to end up as prey than predator there, so he wasn't keen on going there just yet. Ultimately, though, the main reason that he'd decided on Ukei and the others as guards was that they were the most reliable of the lot.

“Let's get going, then. We've got a three-day boat trip ahead of us.”

“It could be more like *two* days if we're lucky, Zelos!”

“Anyway, this should help our budgets a bit, at least...”

It sounded like the three mercenary women were still struggling to get by.

“Ugh... Why does the debt monster have to keep screwing everything up for us? I wish we could just pin it all on someone else...”

“I suppose you just have to hope your little debt monster doesn’t suddenly mega evolve, eh?”

“Don’t jinx us like that! We’re already flat-out broke! I don’t even want to *imagine* things getting worse than they already are!”

The group here clearly had a lot to be worried about, but all the same, they set off by boat toward the mercenaries’ guild in the city of Stihla, where they’d kick off their new temp jobs as guards.

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Countless ships, large and small, were lined up side by side at Santor’s harbor.

Santor was a major trade hub, so it was only natural that there’d be a lot of ships here. But trading ships weren’t the only types anchored here; there were fishing boats and the like as well, with various wharfs set up for ships of different sizes and purposes.

Of course, ships for carrying *people* had to be pretty large, though they weren’t as large as the sort you would’ve been able to find during the Age of Exploration back on Earth.

It wasn’t like they were crossing any oceans, after all, so about the biggest things you’d find here were on the level of a small cargo ship.

From here, Zelos and the others would be taking a transport ship down the Aurus River to the Earldom of Marcote. But they hadn’t expected that they’d be running into a hurdle right at the start of their journey. That hurdle being...

“O Julie, my beloved Julie, tell: wherefore art thou a Humbert from thy birth? If thou hadst been a girl of common stock, our love could blossom unrestrained—but nay!”

“Ah, Romell, thou dost set my heart ablaze; this fire in my heart is love most true! But if our love be doomed to be undone, why, I can only hope to understand the fate imposed by goddesses above.”

A pair of lovebirds deep in the throes of love syndrome were acting out a

scene that looked like it had been ripped straight from a tragedy.

One was the daughter of a prominent merchant family; the other, the heir of that family's bitter rival. They had fallen deeply in love, but their fathers were strongly opposed. And now, the star-crossed lovers had gotten out of control, transforming the harbor into a stage for their love story.

Worse, they were acting out this love story on the very ship that Zelos and the others needed to board, paying no heed to their surroundings as they poured out their hearts to each other. This all sounded like something Zelos had heard of before too...

"I feel like those two are going to end up dying by drinking poison. Oh, wait, no—one of them killed themselves with a knife, didn't they? And how did it all end again...?"

"Huh? There's a big shoot-out between the two families and everyone dies, right?"

"Quiet, you two! It's getting to the good part!"

"Hic..."

Lena and Jeanne were completely engrossed in the sappy scene brought on by the couple's love syndrome. Zelos and Iris, meanwhile, were struggling to recall the details of a certain famous play. Which, by the way, was completely unrelated.

If this dragged on too much longer, it'd be time for the ship to depart. It had already been three hours since the two lovebirds here had started shouting to the world about their love for each other, and the people needing to work around it all had long since gotten fed up with them.

At this rate, the pair's fathers would be the ones to take the blame.

Merchants placed a great deal of importance on their time, and some goods had to be sent out as soon as they were loaded onto a ship. If this dragged on, there'd be a good number of merchants missing out on the chance to make sales.

And the bulk of them would have angry glares reserved for the pair's fathers

as they headed off to talk business.

“If they love each other so much, just let ’em get married already! You’re being pains in all our asses!”

“Stop being so damn stubborn! You’re making it *our* problem! How are you going to compensate us if we miss our business meetings?! Hm? What do you have to say about that, huh?!”

“I’m never doing business with you two again! Just hook ’em up already and get out of our sights!”

The situation was getting worse and worse; even merchants that did business with the couple were now booing them and shouting abuse.

Now that the feud between the merchant families was leading to things like *this*, there was a good chance it would ruin business opportunities for both sides. Innocent workers could end up unemployed and in the gutters if the situation went any further south.

At the same time, neither side wanted to end up related to their bitter rivals through marriage. And so the dilemma stretched on with no end in sight, growing worse with every passing moment.

“My father raised me by his hands alone! Though as the years did pass, he came to care for nothing but his work, and so I found myself an afterthought in his regard. Perceived a simple tool, a good, to be sold off for naught but monetary gain—my hopes and dreams, ignored as foolish whims.”

“O Julie, dearest, thou art not alone in suffering within thine own abode. My father never wished me as his heir—not I, who from a different mother came. My sole respite, the only love I felt within that house was from my stepmom dear, who cared for me as if I were her own! But then, alas, she left this world last month—since which I have endured as best I can. Yet still I cannot stop this mind of mine from begging me to leave mine house behind...”

All at once, everyone present turned their heads to glare at the couple’s fathers.

Both men were highly capable merchants, but their strong-armed approaches had left many an individual in tears.

And they were very suddenly getting a reputation of being greedy men, moneygrubbing swine who cared little for their families.

If this kept up, all the trust they'd built up over the years would vanish in an instant, and no one would want to bring them business proposals anymore. They'd always had a hard time trying to juggle their dual roles as fathers and merchants...but the onlookers here didn't care about their excuses.

"Hurry up and *do* something about those two already! I'm gonna be late for my meeting!"

"Stop screwing around and just get the two damn idiots together! We can't do our jobs like this!"

"Look at how much the two of them love each other! And you're standing in their way? What kind of fathers *are* you?!"

"Seems like the kids have their heads screwed on straighter than their parents, at least, huh? And I bet that's not the only thing they're screwing, if you get what I mean..."

The couple's fathers were starting to look worse and worse. The more time passed, the more they were being driven into a corner.

It'd technically be possible to drag the lovebirds apart using force, especially when they were off in their own world like this. But both of them were holding dangerous chemicals; if anyone wanted to deal with the pair, they'd have to be very careful. The chemicals they were holding were highly flammable, ready to erupt into violent flames the moment they were exposed to oxygen.

In effect, they were trying to threaten their fathers into letting them marry. The interesting thing was, they'd each come up with the exact same plan by themselves without talking it over at all. Clearly, their minds were as one.

Though as interesting as it was, that didn't stop them from being a real nuisance to the other people who were here.

"How much longer is this going to go on for, I wonder? Personally, I'd really like us to get on that ship as soon as we can..."

"So *that's* what love syndrome does to you, huh? It really *is* like 'going into

heat'... Pretty scary. If I ended up confessing to someone like that, I'd literally *die* of embarrassment! Physically *and* socially!"

"Is it just me, or are they moving on to spilling all their family secrets now that they're done with their big confession scene?"

"Yeah. Sounds like they had a lot of things bottled up. And it's all coming bursting out at once."

There was no stopping the couple now.

And with each passing moment, more and more shameful secrets were being revealed about each family, causing their fathers to turn paler and paler.

They were exposing even the most embarrassing little details, things you'd usually hesitate to even talk about. It was sending the bystanders into waves of uproarious laughter.

"I'd thought my father was an upright man, believed my mother was his only love. Mere words cannot describe the shock I had—to hear he had some fifty women more, each kept in tow and threatened with his wealth! The *shame* I felt; I wished that I were dead."

"My father, too, did prove himself so cold; he cruelly cast aside my late stepmom. 'I have no need,' said he, all selfish pomp, 'for any wife who cannot leave an heir.' 'Twas naught but three days hence from then, alas, that she did from our mortal coil depart. The *rage* I felt that day, the *hate*, the *wrath*; I wished the man would meet his bitter end."

Once again, white-hot glares were directed at the couple's fathers.

All of the worst parts of their natures were being laid bare for all to see. It wasn't even a matter of *trust* at this point, but of simply wanting to repudiate the men and everything about them. The air of sheer contempt toward the men made the crowd's expressions so cold, you could practically *feel* them.

Both men were shouting out at once now: "Stop it! Please, stop! We were wrong! We admit it!"

It looked like the two of them had finally cracked.

Trust was everything for a merchant. If that trust began to falter, they stood

to lose their business partners. But it was too late for these two: they'd be *retiring* soon, no doubt about it. There was no coming back from this sort of social annihilation.

Ultimately, it took a while before Zelos and the others were able to board the ship.

They made their way on via a simple gangway—made up of just some layered planks—and finally, Zelos's party, birds included, were on the ship.

"What a scene. Well, we're finally on board..."

"So...they really *do* go into heat, huh? It looks like a really annoying thing to have happen to you..."

"Well, at least it's not *our* problem. I don't really mind as long as they keep it to themselves."

As reincarnators, Zelos and Iris saw this phenomenon as something that'd never have anything to do with them.

But the moment they looked back down to the wharf from on board the ship, they realized how naive that assumption had been.

"Stop right there! *Shit*, they're fast..."

"I know it's nothing new, but why do we have to get swarmed by these idiots every year?!"

The two reincarnators stared silently at the scene playing out below them.

There were couples running through the harbor stark naked, laughing, while men and women alike dived onto the targets of their affections, unable to hold themselves back any longer. There were even stalkers trying to drag their beloveds away to some hidden place; the point being, the harbor was filled with individuals proclaiming their love to the world in all sorts of intense, excessive ways.

And, as happened every year, the guards were stuck in a game of cat and mouse trying to catch them all.

"Th-This is *chaos*. It's terrifying. And it looks like you can't just talk reason into people when they get like this..."

“A-Am / gonna end up like that someday too? I don’t wanna think about it, Mister... I don’t want my social life to end like that...”

The harbor was in a state of mayhem. And Zelos and Iris were being made keenly aware that they couldn’t just write this all off as someone else’s problem.

There was the risk that either of them could go through this themselves someday. That they would fall head-over-heels in love with someone; that they themselves might someday *join* that crazy crowd. Shivers went down their spines, and each of them felt a cold sweat forming on their brow.

Jeanne and Lena, meanwhile, saw the spectacle as just another annual event at this point. They were used to it.

The ship departed as Zelos and Iris continued to quiver in fear, having witnessed the terrors that love syndrome could bring.

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The city of Stihla was famous for being home to the Istol Academy of Magic.

And a carriage containing a certain man was just arriving at the city’s mercenaries’ guild.

The man had just so happened to encounter a transport carriage run by the guild as he was walking along the highway. He’d negotiated with them to get a ride, and spent the long resulting trip being jostled about from side to side as the carriage made its way along. And it seemed like that jostling had left him feeling pretty unwell.

The long hood obscuring his face made it hard for those around him to get a proper look at him, but he was covering his mouth with a hand as if he were fighting back the urge to vomit. He wasn’t the only one either—the other passengers were all in a similar state, each of them suffering from bad motion sickness.

“All right. We’re here. Get out. I’ve gotta get to another job now.”

“*Blegh...* Thanks...for the ride. *Ugh...*”

The driver didn’t seem to have even a sliver of sympathy for the passengers;

they were more just muttering to themselves angrily at the thought that they might have to clean vomit out of their carriage once again. But that was the least of the traveler's worries.

He *had* been fortunate to encounter this carriage on the highway, that much was true. But the problem had come after that.

As soon as he'd boarded, the driver's personality had changed completely; they'd turned very high-strung and set the carriage roaring down the highway at a canter. And the carriage hadn't stopped once the whole way to the city.

Not long after boarding, the man had started to think himself a fool. He should've noticed something, he realized, based on the expressions of those who'd already been aboard.

Still, he'd been in a hurry; he hadn't had the luxury of worrying about it at the time. It was only after boarding that he'd realized what a dangerous journey he'd signed himself up for. After the realization had come the experience, then the suffering, then the regret. But it had been far too late by then.

The results of his decision were already set in stone. And by now, he had such a bad case of motion sickness that he couldn't even walk.

Several of the passengers had had their hair turn gray from the stress. Though now that they were finally off, they felt sheer, unbridled joy at the fact that they'd survived; they felt the goddesses must be smiling upon them.

As the man continued to fight back the urge to vomit, he resolved:

I'm never riding in a carriage again.

After resting for a while, he stepped foot into the city's mercenaries' guild.

The place was, to sum it up, essentially a tavern; you could even say it was akin to a casual family restaurant. It hardly had the vibe of a place frequented by mercenaries.

The entrance to the guild was neatly decorated with potted houseplants. The interior had a relaxed atmosphere that made it look like the kind of place that'd be popular with students, and it seemed like it was also frequented by friend groups, lovers, and so on.

If not for the reception desk and the request board, it would've looked like nothing but a nice place to eat.

And as the man made his way inside, he and he alone stuck out like a sore thumb.

He had a scarf wound around his face as if to hide it, and wore a black coat and leather armor. He had weapons too—a scimitar and a shotel by his hips. It was a complete mismatch with the vibe of the guild and its patrons, and it made him look immediately suspicious.

Regardless, the man scanned his surroundings, looking for the people he was scheduled to meet up with.

The guild restaurant had seating for customers both on the ground floor and on a second-floor loft, and upon seeing that his companions weren't on the first floor, the man headed up the stairs.

Where are... Oh. There they are.

The people he was looking for were seated right in the middle of the loft, drinking tea.

There were four of them in total: two well-dressed men who looked like merchants, and two women who looked like mages.

The two men in the seats seemed to be guides. One of the women was in her early twenties, with wavy shoulder-length hair and almond-shaped eyes that gave her an intellectual look. She was a mage wearing a red-and-black robe paired with a breastplate.

The other woman had somewhat droopy eyes, and her hair was in a ponytail. She was at an age that she still had a young and innocent look about her.

She was a mage too, with an eye-catching green robe. Besides that, she wore leather greaves and armor. She almost looked more like a swordswoman, but her robe and staff made it clear she was a mage.

Both were wearing higher-quality equipment than the mercenaries in all the other seats, causing the group to stand out in the mercenaries' guild. They were clearly of higher status than the other people there.

“So you made it here, huh? We were thinking you might’ve forgotten what day we were meant to meet up!”

“Well, isn’t *someone* late, Ado? We were thinking we’d go back to the inn if you weren’t here within an hour.”

“Yeah—you’re twenty minutes late! Still, I’m kinda impressed you made it. You were in the Duchy of Solistia, right?”

“I was lucky enough to run into a carriage on the highway. Honestly, I was worried I wouldn’t be able to meet up with you guys.”

The man called Ado gave an awkward smile as he lowered the hood of his cloak.

He was in his early twenties. He had a tuft of hair that always stuck out on the top of his head, and a boyish face that made him look younger than he really was. His gear alone, though, made it clear that he was no ordinary individual. Take one look at him and you’d assume he was an assassin belonging to some shady organization.

He gave off the impression of a good-natured young man, but sometimes, you could see him take a subtle, wary glance around his surroundings. It was the habit of a capable individual.

All the same, you’d have to be pretty capable yourself to notice such a subtle habit in the first place. He made it look natural.

“Oh, and thanks to you two for showing them the way here. You accompanied them from outside the country, right?”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. This is our job, after all.”

“Now that you’ve all managed to meet up, we’ll be heading back to our inn. We have other business to get to.”

“Right. Sorry for the hassle.”

The two men stood from their seats and left with little further discussion.

They were spies sent from *a certain country* for intelligence purposes, and they’d been tasked with guiding the two female mages here. They wouldn’t meet the women again until it was time to pull out of the Magic Kingdom of

Solistia.

In the meantime, they'd be hard at work gathering intelligence.

"Jeez... I thought I was gonna die back there. I didn't think the carriage was going to be pulled by two *sleipnirs*... And seriously, you wouldn't believe how it shook! That was *terrible*!"

"Shakti was worried too, you know? Since you went off and did stuff on your own like that..."

"I didn't have much choice, did I? It was a request from the higher-ups. It's not like I *wanna* make anything dangerous. Even then...it went so much worse than I thought it would."

"What happened?"

"Look, I can't talk about it in a loud voice, so..." He leaned in and started whispering. "The test subjects turned into *monsters*."

The two women responded with shock. They were lost for words.

And as the gravity of Ado's statement sunk in, they shot him looks of fear—or was it contempt, perhaps?

It wasn't like Ado had *wanted* any of that to happen, though. He wasn't exactly pleased with how things had turned out.

"Ado... How *could* you? That's *evil*!"

"Come on, Lisa... Don't look at me like that. I didn't think anything like that'd happen, seriously! They were just little fragments that people happened to dig up, but apparently they make crazy shit happen for some reason."

He was talking about a number of mysterious stones that had been dug up in a certain country. Those stones had been used to make magic tools that, in theory, would grant the user power if they simply supplied the tools with mana. But the test subjects had ended up being transfigured into monsters.

If the tools had worked well without any side effects, the plan had been to formally mass-produce them for military use. But now that it was clear they were far too dangerous for that, this research would probably be abandoned.

Lisa's eyes began to tear up, her long ponytail shaking along with her head, while Shakti meddled with her own wavy hair and let out a deep sigh.

The plan had been to make *safe* magic tools. Ones that didn't end up with any human sacrifices.

"Well, we can still get some shady people from the underworld to sell them all instead. I dunno how long we'd be able to keep something that terrifying in safe storage anyway."

"Would that really be okay? Couldn't that cause problems for us too? What if they trace the supply and we end up getting caught?"

"I understand why you'd be worried, Shakti, but they're not the kind of things we can just keep with us forever. And all hell would break loose if some other country found out we had them."

"Mmm... Well, I guess we're lucky there aren't that many of them. But if we *do* end up selling them to the underworld, there'll probably be at least *some* casualties among the public, I assume..."

"That probably depends on how well we coordinate. We can just make them mix tiny amounts into some sort of crazy drug and dispose of them bit by bit like that. The sort of people who'd buy that kinda thing aren't people I'd care too much about in the first place."

"I'm guessing *you've* got mixed feelings about it, Shakti? Since you want to be a lawyer and all that."

Shakti responded to Lisa's question with a deep sigh.

The three of them, including Ado, were reincarnators. And Shakti had been hoping to become a lawyer back on Earth; she had a strong sense of justice. Of course, she *was* aware that there was no such thing as absolute justice...but she'd never in her life dreamed that she'd one day be asked to support the sale of illicit substances.

"If a war breaks out, we'll just do what we have to do."

"Y'know, Ado, you'll pretty much be treated like a class-A war criminal if people find out what you're doing..."

“Ugh... Yeah, I don’t want that. I mean, there probably *would* be some victims, even if we aren’t the ones directly responsible. It’s just... Look, I don’t want to do anything like this either! But we can’t just leave stuff like *that* lying around...”

“Huh? Wait... Shakti, wouldn’t the two of us be his accomplices?”

After following the train of Ado’s logic, Lisa had reached a conclusion that left her trembling and asking the other two for their thoughts.

But she was met with silence.

One way or another, one thing was clear: they did *not* want to be found out.

A little over three months ago, the three of them had been thrown into the outskirts of a small country in the mountains.

They’d gone looking for any human settlement they could find, which had eventually brought them to a small village. But the village was destitute, just barely scraping by on a meager amount of food. Aiming to survive there, Ado and the others had gone searching for food around the rocky foot of a mountain. And their efforts had helped the villagers to just barely escape starvation and suffering too.

The three of them had just felt awkward about having the poverty-stricken village share what little food they had, prompting them to go out in a desperate search for food themselves; that was all it had been. But after a while, they’d found a vegetable known as the polta—a kind of potato that grew in rocky areas—and when they had brought it back, the villagers had managed to start cultivating it. It had gone on to grow at a tremendous rate, giving the village far more food to survive on. Rumors of the polta had spread to surrounding villages, and eventually they’d reached the ear of the country’s king. And so the three reincarnators had found themselves summoned to the royal castle of the Kingdom of Isalas.

That by itself hadn’t really been a problem. No, the problem came from the fact that the Kingdom of Isalas was trying to start a war. Perhaps the country’s food shortage easing up a little had made that option available when it hadn’t been before. Ado and the others had been welcomed into the country as authority figures, and entrusted with helping it to develop weapons.

As part of that effort, the Kingdom of Isalas was carrying out research into a collection of mysterious stones. Ado had handled the development of a magic formula to be etched into amulets containing the stones, culminating in prototypes referred to as the Warrior's Amulets.

Some of these amulets had been given to a group of thuggish mercenaries, turning them into unwitting test subjects...but all of those mercenaries had ended up transforming into hideous beasts. The amulets clearly weren't viable in their current state.

The plan had been to just observe how well the magic formula worked. But instead, those observations had revealed that Ado had made some truly troublesome, dangerous items.

Perhaps they were lucky to have found that out now rather than later.

"Well, this should give us a little more freedom to act, at least..."

"You're not wrong, but...couldn't this lead to a war? And if the villagers end up getting dragged into it..."

"At the very least, I don't think they'll try to invade Solistia. The route along the Aurus River's been blocked off midway. So they've gotta rethink any plans they might've had for an invasion. I don't want a war to happen *at all* though, mind you."

"Mmm... Well, I suppose we'll be able to take some time to investigate things here, then. I've been wanting to see the academy's library for a while, you know."

"That's the plan. We've all got the Decipher Language skill, so we can read the books here too."

They had a goal. And if they wanted to achieve that goal, then first, they needed information.

The place they'd set their sights on in order to gather that information was the library of an institute known as the Istol Academy of Magic. It was part of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, and it had the largest collection of books in any country.

“All right, then. How about we get going?”

“Sounds good. The sooner we find things out, the better.”

“I think we should try and find out stuff about tools that could help with industry stuff too. I want to do as much as I can to make people’s lives easier.”

“We will—if we have time. But don’t forget what we’re here for, ‘kay, Lisa?”

“I know. But I was never some hardcore player like you were, Ado. Investigating how stuff works isn’t my strong suit. All I ever did was adventuring; I thought looking stuff up was just a pain.”

Lisa didn’t sound very confident in herself, but Ado wanted every bit of help he could get. You could never have too many helping hands, he figured.

They finished their meal while going over their plans, paid at the counter, and headed off at a brisk pace through the city streets, toward the academy’s library.

*

The group walked north along the main street of Stihla and through a public park the academy’s students frequented for rest and relaxation. Eventually, they arrived at an enormous building.

It had an artistic design, combining Gothic-style architecture with all sorts of other architectural flairs. It somewhat resembled a certain famous world heritage site from Earth.

“What is this, Notre-Dame? The style looks *really* similar...”

“It’s about twice as big as that though, isn’t it? And if you look close enough, it seems like they’ve kept adding to it over the years.”

“With enough time, I guess it might just be natural for people to come up with the same ideas and make the same things, whichever world you’re in. Anyway, how can you even tell which parts they added on later? I’ve got *no* idea.”

“You can tell if you look at the color of the stones. See? There are joints too, and it looks like they started using concrete blocks at some point. If it’s anything like Roman concrete, it should be pretty durable... Still, though, it’s amazing they managed to do something like this without construction equipment.”

“You know a lot about this stuff, huh, Lisa?”

“Well, my dad worked in the construction industry, and I went to the real thing myself to take a look when I was doing my pâtissier training.”

The grounds of the Istol Academy of Magic were frighteningly large.

This library was far bigger than it had any right to be, and yet it took up only a tiny slice of those grounds, in relative terms.

Most of the grounds were taken up by research facilities, and there were even dorms for the sons and daughters of the nobility to live in. You could tell the whole place had been built up with vast sums of money over the years; no expense had been spared.

The academy had been here since before the founding of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. At this point, a lot of the specifics behind the urban development surrounding the academy had been lost to time, but what *was* still known was that all of the spending in the city had led to financial strife.

You could still see the lavish theaters and music halls that had been built during that development boom dotted around the city.

The king at the time had said, “Stihla should be the most beautiful city in the world, a shining beacon of the arts. Its name should be etched into the annals of history.” But his insistence on all that spending had ultimately led to a coup d’état, and the king’s dream of a “shining beacon of the arts” had never been fully completed.

Policies put in place with the support of that king had led to resentment among the people, and the magic nobles—who’d been treated as the lowest rung in the noble hierarchy—rose up to form a new country. Ultimately, the king from back then *had* ended up in the history books—not for overseeing the construction of a wondrous city of the arts, but for being an utter fool.

That history was embodied by a monument erected in the national park—it was ironic, really, that the shining jewel in the king’s crown had ended up as a place to raise future generations of the very mages who’d overthrown him. It had been recycled, you could say.

“Why’d they build a monument to it?”

“The nice answer is probably that they did it to pass down their history...but I think they would’ve just done it to appeal to the common people. Kind of like they’re saying, ‘We won’t end up like that fool of a king’ or ‘We fought on the side of justice.’ Like they’re justifying what they did.”

“So they’re trying to build themselves an explanation—both literally and figuratively. Yeah? But is that the *real* history, or...?”

“Who knows? If I had to take a guess, I’d say that the mages probably rebelled because of their lower social status. If the king from back then was a despot who only cared about the arts, the mages would’ve used that as a convenient excuse to steal his power for themselves. That’s what I think, at least.”

Engraved into a plaque on the monument was the name of the first king of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, and the family names of the magic nobles who’d taken part in the coup. It had been left there as a reminder that the magic nobles had overthrown the previous rulers.

The reason it was here in Stihla, specifically, was probably because this was the city that the foolish king had loved more than anywhere else.

“What was even the point in making a plaque like that? It just makes it damn obvious that they did the coup out of self-interest, right? I mean, it was obviously just a rebellion by magic nobles who wanted more power for themselves...?”

“Well, the common people are more likely to cooperate with a new regime if there’s a symbol like that to tell an easy-to-understand story of the regime being on the side of justice. Most of them probably didn’t know anything about domestic politics anyway, and it sounds like their lives weren’t exactly great before. There’ll be something along those lines written inside, I’m pretty sure. And, well, if the head of the country changing didn’t actually hurt the lives of the common people, I don’t think they’d really care.”

A single plaque could reveal a lot about the hidden side of history.

Shakti clearly wasn’t letting herself get carried away by the spectacle of it either. It showed she had a good head on her shoulders, but it was also a sign of her cynical personality.

“It’s almost like we’re on a sightseeing trip, huh?”

“Well, I suppose you’re not wrong, in the sense that we’re here to find out more about the place’s history...”

“I guess it’s nice knowing you won’t always take things like the plaque at face value, but jeez, couldn’t you just appreciate the architecture a little as well? You’re kinda a downer.”

“Oh? But I *am* appreciating it, in my own way. You can find out a lot about things just by asking questions, you know—questions like *I wonder how much all the ornaments on that building took out of the budget?* or *I wonder if they ever paid the builders for this properly?* In my opinion, there’s no way they weren’t in the red with all of this. It’s no surprise there was a coup. You can’t build something as big as a whole city with taxpayer money alone. If the country had been focused on *commerce*, there would never have been a coup in the first place. Since, well, they would’ve been rich enough that it wouldn’t have mattered.”

Shakti had a fairly *technical* way of appreciating the scenery.

But she was right in that these sorts of buildings—things like world heritage sites—were some of the best windows you could get into a country’s politics and economy at the time they were built.

Some amazing world heritage sites had seen their construction stall at one point or another before being finished off at a later date, and there were plenty of others that had *never* been finished. In some cases, you could have one castle made up of all sorts of different architectural styles mashed together. And a lot of the time, these sites belonged to countries that had focused on commerce, allowing them to become wealthy and survive.

Those that had been around a long time could also tell stories about what had changed. For example, there were various world heritage sites that had been renovated or rebuilt over the years, whether due to a change in ownership, or an invasion during war, or the will of some politician or another.

And the Istol Academy of Magic was no exception; it was something to be viewed through the lens of history.

“You’re less like a lawyer and more like an accountant, huh?”

“Well, lawyers *can* have to do things like accounting when the job calls for it, so...”

“It’s all too technical for me! I don’t know and I don’t care! Can’t we just look at the pretty buildings?”

“What are you talking about? Just erecting a building with beautiful architecture like this has to cost a lot of money, you know? Which is one thing if the people building it are rich, but it’s not the sort of thing a small country should go for on a whim. The scale of the academy, all the buildings around it; who knows *how* much must the common people here have suffered for this to be built? Even the Great Buddha of Nara probably caused a lot of people to die from a food shortage at the time! Would building a statue really be enough for you to earn salvation if you’d caused something like that in the process, I wonder? If you ask me, anyone with the sort of money to build that sort of thing should be putting it back into the economy instead.”

Shakti was essentially insulting the people of the past through the lens of her modern knowledge.

“By the way, Marie Antoinette was actually innocent, you know? Apparently the economy was just weak because they were sending money to the New World, and the nobles were living within their means. The common people were ignorant, though, and they started a revolution—but it’s not that easy to fix an economy. I imagine it took a while for them all to get out of poverty after that... Regardless, this is why I think politics should be more of a public affair. If the people don’t know anything about what’s happening in their own country, they *might* try and launch a revolution based on some kind of hasty judgment, and it can end terribly. Besides, I feel bad for the people who get killed for things they didn’t do.”

“Knowledge is important, I guess.”

“Is that really what you got out of all that?” Lisa asked.

“Even terrorists go around promoting their own ideas of justice—but just say they *do* manage to create their own country. Then what? I feel like they’d just end up creating a dictatorship. I just can’t see how extremists like that would

ever manage to understand economics properly, and whatever country they form would probably fall apart due to terrorism itself before long. No amount of praying to any god will save them. Self-centered children can wave around their weapons all they want, but do they really think they'll manage to change anything for the better? Do they not realize their own actions are what's responsible for their poverty?"

"Terrorists are just jealous of countries that have decent economies, so they see them as their enemies, right? There are so many fraudsters out there saying they're acting in the name of some god or another. Just look at the Holy Land of Metis—a big group of frauds."

"Well, I'm not sure racial conflicts are quite as simple as that... There are usually a lot of different factions at play, and all kind of other historical factors that—"

"Ah, whatever!"

People were free to decide for themselves what they learned from history.

Ado had his reasons for bringing up the Holy Land of Metis though. Its military was threatening the Kingdom of Isalas.

There was no god of politics, and yet Metis was intent on settling every matter in their favor by simply proclaiming "it is the will of the gods." In response, the Kingdom of Isalas was focusing on strengthening its own military.

Shakti had a solid understanding of what was going on. But there was a vast chasm of academic ability between her—who'd been working hard to try and earn a national certification—and Ado, who was just your average half-hearted university student.

"More importantly—shouldn't we be heading into the library soon? Ado seems kinda tired; I think we should get our research done as soon as we can. Then we can take our time to enjoy sightseeing."

"Oh! Good point, Lisa. We should've done that earlier!"

"Uh, Shakti, *you're* the one that went off on a tangent just now..."

Ado's plan had always been to just look around the city and find out what

they wanted to know along the way. But things had gotten derailed when Shakti started looking into the forgotten side of history. It was hard to point to the specific moment things had gone wrong.

Either way, they'd finally gotten the discussion back on track now. Ado breathed an exhausted sigh.

He'd always been terrible with complex topics like this.

"Shall we head inside, then?"

"Yeah!"

"I wanted to do that in the first place, y'know... Ah, whatever."

Having just about given up on winning that particular argument, Ado passed through the doorway to the library. Inside were rows of tables set up for reading the library's books, and a number of the academy's students were sitting there, diligently reading.

There were some members of the general public around as well. Books and the like weren't cheap in this world, and there weren't many countries that had libraries with books as precious as these available to the public. But the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, at least, did just that. It was part of the country's policy of being open and transparent with the public.

Still, books that fell under certain categories, or covered certain topics, could be deemed dangerous, and those were kept in a special section that only the students and teachers could access. The entrance to that section was constantly watched over by librarians and guards.

"Whoa..."

"It's three whole floors?! Jeez... I guess sorting by genre would help, but it's gotta be tough to find something you're looking for when there are this many books."

"Couldn't you just ask one of the librarians? Places like this are usually managed by government employees, aren't they? Anyway, I wonder what kind of books we should even be looking for to begin with..."

"History books, anything related to ancient ruins, and stuff about religion,

would be my guess. I hear the academy has an economics department too—seems like they might run it less like the ‘magic academy’ it’s called and more like a university.”

“There are definitely plenty of books here, huh? I feel like this is gonna take a while. I don’t think we’ll be done anytime soon...”

“Yeah; I mean, we haven’t even *started* yet. Lisa, can you look for books about religion? Shakti, you look for history books, and I’ll look for stuff about old ruins. We wanna find out everything we can about the four gods.”

Ado felt like something was *off* about this world. Specifically, some of the things it had—stats, skills, levels—seemed like they should never exist within any reasonable laws of nature, and they had a lot of overlap with what was found in *Swords & Sorceries*.

Or, rather, while these systems themselves weren’t quite as strictly defined as their *Swords & Sorceries* equivalents, even things like certain geographical features—and the names of all sorts of items you could collect from gathering, mining, and so on—were almost the same as in the game. Magic here wasn’t particularly advanced, but Ado knew a lot about it. In contrast, there was plenty he didn’t know about monsters...but even then, it seemed like a lot of the monsters he *did* know from the game could be found here as well.

After a lot of thought, the three of them had reached a conclusion—coincidentally, the same one a certain Great Sage had arrived at. But if they were going to try and prove their hypothesis, they’d need a lot more information. That was the main reason they’d come to the library.

There were so many books here worth looking into, though. The sheer scale of the task ahead was enough to make their minds boggle.

Breathing a reluctant sigh at the workload in front of him, Ado went to the counter to pay the library’s entrance fee, then headed to the area with books about ancient ruins.

*

Having finally boarded their ship, Zelos and the others were partway through a three-day journey downstream to the city of Cezan.

They were on a sailing ship, specifically—and that meant it couldn't do much but float along with the current when there was no wind. That was the case right now, in fact, so the ship wasn't going anywhere in a hurry.

If anything, there was often a headwind at this time of year, making the ship slower due to wind resistance. It hadn't been a quick trip.

At this rate, the group wasn't sure they were going to make it in time for their meeting. For now, though, that wasn't Zelos's top concern...

"BLERGH!"

He and Iris were hanging out together, both feeling terribly seasick.

While Zelos had no way of knowing, it was right around this same spot, on the same route, that his pupil Zweit had gotten badly seasick himself. That was one thing teacher and student had in common, it seemed...

"Are we... Are we really not there yet?"

"This *sucks*... I feel like I'm gonna die... Actually, just kill me now..."

"Never thought *both* of you would be this weak at sea! We didn't bring any seasickness medicine with us either."

As Jeanne stood there surprised, Zelos and Iris were covering their mouths with their hands, fighting against the urge to vomit.

Neither of them had any real experience at sea; they weren't used to all the swaying. Actually, they were faring better than some others...but they were still in a terrible state, with no hope of feeling better anytime soon.

Even once they *did* get to Cezan, they'd never be able to ride a carriage in this state.

"Well, it's not much farther, so you'll just have to deal with it until then, 'kay?"

"I hope you're right... *Blegh!*"

"Ugh... I never wanna get on a ship again..."

"C'mon, don't say that. Seriously, we're pretty close now. Anyway—you sure this is a good idea, geezer?"

“S-Sure *what’s* a good idea?”

“Bringing Lena to an academy. Knowing her, she’ll probably, uh...”

Even though Jeanne was the one saying it, she started to blush more with every word.

For a moment, the air stood still.

Zelos and Iris mulled over what Jeanne had just said for a bit—and then, it was like light bulbs went off in their heads. Having finally realized what she’d meant, they both wore a look of utter shock. They’d forgotten about a certain problem within their party until just now.

Lena was a hopeless shotacon, with a passion for boys who’d just reached this world’s definition of adulthood. She was the type to gorge herself on unripe fruit, so to say, and she was so brazen about it that she even proudly declared herself “a woman who’ll live on within so many people’s memories of their youth.”

Zelos had been so busy lately with preparing for this job, and Iris had been entirely focused on trying to earn some money and get her party out of poverty. Both of them had completely forgotten about Lena’s proclivities until Jeanne had brought them up again just now.

But letting Lena loose in this kind of environment would be like unleashing a *T. rex* upon a flock of sheep.

“That’s right... I *did* feel like I was forgetting something. If we don’t do something about it, those boys are going to fall into her clutches. The training camp will turn into a den of lus— *Blegh...*”

“I was so worried about money that I didn’t even realize... Lena’s going to... This is bad, Miste— *Glurf!*”

At this rate, their presence at the training camp would only result in *more* victims; that much seemed clear. It’d be the perfect hunting ground for Lena.

Zelos had brought her along because he was short on hands, but he was realizing now that he might just be adding another predator to the forest. At this point, though, there wasn’t all that much he could do about it.

By the way, the three cocos he'd brought with him were eating some fish they'd caught earlier as they nursed the two reincarnators who'd fallen seasick. It seemed like they were some pretty caring birds.

"We took down an orc king on the highway, I'll have ya know! Looking after some brats'll be nothin'."

"Mmm? I thought you were a bunch of small fry, but maybe you're more useful than you look."

"Course we are! Throw as many big scary monsters at us as ya can—we'll kill 'em all!"

There was a group of very confident men on the ship. They seemed like pretty rough mercenaries, and not strong ones, at that. They certainly didn't look like they'd be able to take down an orc king, at least.

Wait—"on the highway"? Don't tell me, was that from when I... Urf. BLERGH...

Zelos's stomach had nothing left in it at this point, but he continued to be tormented by wave after hellish wave of the urge to vomit. All he could do was endure it as best he could.

Finally, the ship arrived at the harbor in the city of Cezan.

*

"Jeez, it's good to be off that thing. If I'm going to die, I want to die on *land*. Let's not take a ship on the way back..."

"Yeah. I didn't think it'd rock that bad!"

It was about an hour after the party—Zelos, Iris, Jeanne, Lena, and the cocos—had gotten off the ship. Zelos and Iris had finally stopped needing to throw up, but they still weren't in great condition.

It had been incredibly lame seeing Zelos—a Great Sage, clad in the ultimate gear from head to toe—lose to *seasickness*. Jeanne and Lena had been dumbfounded by the spectacle.

Still, there was no time for sitting around. Between the couple in the clutches of love syndrome spilling out their hearts at Santor's harbor and the headwind the ship had faced on the way here, they'd arrived behind schedule. They

needed to hurry to Stihla now, or they'd be late.

The academy had arranged for everyone to meet at the mercenaries' guild in Stihla before the bell for sunset rang this evening; the party didn't have the leisure of being picky about how they got there. At the same time, Zelos and Iris were still feeling a little seasick.

"C'mon. You're being pathetic. It wasn't even rocking that much."

"I can't exactly do much about it, you know. You have to get used to things like this over time. I'll try and look into travel sickness medicine before the next time I get on a ship, at least..."

"If you figure out how to make it, Mister, teach me how. I wanna be able to make it too..."

"You know, Zelos, I wasn't expecting you to have a weakness like that. But I suppose you're human after all, hey?"

"Lena... What do you mean, 'after all'? If you didn't think I was a human, then what'd you think I was? But yes, of course I have my weaknesses. Massive cockroaches, for one."

His three party members responded in unison: "Please don't bring that up again!"

Great givleon materials made better armor than materials from any other insect monster.

But that didn't stop people from loathing the poor things.

"Hey, ladies. Wanna take a ride in our carriage?"

"Bet yer goin' to Stihla, yeah? We'll give yas a ride. On the carriage—and on us too. Geh heh."

It was the group of loud men from back on the ship.

And it was clear as daylight that they'd called out to the women with ulterior motives.

"Don't need it. We've got our own legs."

"Yeah. And I feel like you'd be charging us a lot to get on that carriage."

“Do you *really* think you’re being subtle with that? If you’re just trying to hit on women, try it somewhere else, please.”

Iris and the others had chosen to provoke the group rather than ignoring them. And as you might expect, it sent the men into a rage.

They were the ones who’d called out with bad intentions, of course. And now they were getting upset that their targets weren’t falling for it.

Still, if they had been smart enough to understand that, they wouldn’t’ve been trying to pull a stunt like this in the first place. There were a lot of mercenaries out there like these guys—no common sense among the lot of them.

It was yet another hassle for Zelos’s group, who wanted to get to Stihla as quickly as they could. All this was enough to give Zelos a headache.

“So ya think that old fart with the coccos is better than us, huh?!”

“Listen to this, ladies—we killed an *orc king* the other day! You seriously think the geezer over there’s better than us young studs?”

“Don’t underestimate the coccos. They’re stronger than all of *you*, at least! And kind of cute, if you look at them close enough.”

“Yeah! Especially now that Mister here’s been training them. They’re, like, *super* monsters!”

“I reckon *they* might be able to one-shot an orc king, actually... Kinda suspicious about whether they’re even chickens at this point, though.”

The coccos seemed to be feeling shy from the praise. Or...was that just their attempt at being humble, perhaps?

“An orc king, you say? Are you sure you didn’t just beat up one that was practically already dead? From the look of you lot, I think you’d struggle against *regular* orcs. No way you’d have a chance against a king.”

“Wh-What the hell are you talking about?!”

“We killed it with our own skills! Don’t just make shit up, old man!”

“Are you *sure* about that? It’s not just that you were out guarding some

merchants along the Far-Flung Highway when some mysterious black thing came out of nowhere and slammed into an orc king, so you took the opportunity to gang up and whale on it while it was down?”

The mercenaries had been all bluster and indignation just moments ago...but all of a sudden, they were looking away.

They hadn’t expected anyone here to know the real story.

“*Ohhh. So you’re* the one that killed that orc king, Mister?”

“Yeah. There were some merchants getting attacked by orcs on the road right after I’d gone around a curve. I couldn’t stop in time, so I just slammed into the orc king. It felt like a pretty good impact, so...I *think* it would’ve been almost dead from that? I mean, I was going at about 120 kilometers an hour or something when I hit it, and it went flying pretty far...”

“So, what—you lot are acting like hotshots just because you managed to steal the credit for someone else’s kill? Doesn’t sound like you’re the kinda mercenaries anyone could trust. I can just see you betraying your client in the middle of a request.”

“You even tried to boast about it in front of the person who actually made the kill? That’s *embarrassing*.”

You could almost *see* the mercenary men deflating.

If the man here covered from head to toe in black hadn’t appeared when he did, they probably would’ve all been long dead by now, killed by the orc king. Zelos had saved their lives.

Whatever the men tried to say now, it’d only make things *more* embarrassing for them. And realizing that, they scrambled onto the carriage and set it off at a canter, escaping from the situation as quickly as they could.

“Running away, huh? Makes me embarrassed to see, as a fellow mercenary.”

“I certainly wouldn’t want to work with them. Besides, I can see them getting the wrong idea and trying to assault me.”

“I mean, Lena, you’re usually the one doing the assaulting, aren’t y... Never mind. Let’s just go.”

As Jeanne, Lena, and Iris began walking, Zelos pulled his Harley-Sanders Model 13 out of his inventory. He also pulled out a trailer and attached it to a hitch he'd installed just behind the motorbike's rear seat.

Each of the trailer's four wheels were independent from each other, and a magic-based signaling system allowed it to brake at the same time as the motorbike, so it was safe. As safe as it could be without seat belts or airbags, at least.

"Uh, Mister...are you telling us to get onto that?"

"It's a lot steadier than a carriage, you know? And it's got suspension, so it shouldn't vibrate as much."

"Look, he's even got cushions in there..."

"Enough space for the coccos too, huh?"

"I'll drive safely, but it'll be faster than a carriage. There's still room for improvement, though, mind you."

Iris and the others loaded their luggage onto the trailer.

It wasn't long before the lot of them were riding Zelos's jet-black motorbike and trailer to Stihla.

And this time, he made sure to drive at a nice, safe, sixty kilometers per hour.

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Meanwhile, another carriage was heading along the highway to Stihla.

Its passengers were all mercenary men, from a party called the Redpelt Bears.

All of them were notorious thugs—not that the guild had a problem with them, since they generally managed to get the job done. Right now, though, they were fuming in their carriage.

"Shit! How'd the bastard even *know* all that?! I don't get it!"

"Fuck if I know! Argh, that redhead was hot... Big tits too."

"The other one wasn't half bad either! But that black-armored dude just *had* to get in our way, didn't he..."

“I, uh... I liked the flat one.”

“What the fuck?!”

It seemed like there was demand out there for Iris’s type too—though the very stocky-looking man went red as he admitted it. Either way, it seemed like Iris’s party had been in all sorts of danger.

“That asshole just couldn’t keep his mouth shut!”

“Seriously, though—how’d he even know all that?”

“Don’t ask *me*!”

The men were holding a grudge against Zelos for interrupting their little pickup attempt.

“They’re here for the mercenary job too, right? ‘Cause I reckon nobody’d be surprised if one bastard got hurt out in that forest. You get me?”

“Oh, you wanna be sneaky about it? Yeah, right, I get you. Then those ladies’d be... Geh heh.”

“Uh... First, you sure we gonna make it to the meeting in time? Ain’t we gonna be cuttin’ it pretty close?”

“Nah, we’ll be good. We got until the bell rings at sunset, yeah? We’ll be there by then, *eas*— Huh?”

VROOOOOOOOOOM!

There was a shrill, earsplitting sound, and it was rapidly getting louder. Closer. It was a sound that the men here had heard somewhere before.

Confusion on their faces, they looked behind them, and saw something kicking up a cloud of dust as it approached.

Before long, they were able to make out what it was: a jet-black *something*. And it surged right alongside their carriage.

Terrified, the horses pulling the carriage reared up and dashed off the highway, entering the nearby forest at a canter before falling to their sides. The carriage’s axle snapped with an impressive sound—and the men didn’t get it repaired until sunset.

These mercenaries had apparently been preparing to accept the same guard job as Zelos's group. But now, there was no way they'd make it to the meeting point by the deadline.

They headed there anyway, but by the time they finally arrived, the guild employees were getting ready to go home for the day. The men tried to force the employees into letting them join the mission, but it only made things worse. Ultimately, their application was outright canceled.

They were left with nothing to show for their time—except for some injuries and debt for the money they'd borrowed to get to Stihla and fix the carriage.

It was almost enough to make you feel sorry for them...until you remembered what they'd done. They were simply suffering the consequences of their own actions.

Chapter 4: Zweit Gives Samtrol a Dose of Reality

Zweit was dreaming.

He was *aware* he was dreaming too. After all, he was in a dim, eerie mansion—the room he was standing in was more of a dilapidated ruin than anything else—and he was lucid enough to realize that it couldn't be reality.

He couldn't control his body, though. It was moving forward all by itself. Walking, step by step, as if something were luring him in.

It almost felt like he was floating, which only made him *more* convinced he was in a dream. The only problem was, he didn't know how to wake up.

All on its own, Zweit's body opened the door to the room ahead.

"You're finally here, Zweit. I've been waiting for you."

Zweit immediately recognized the voice calling out to him. It was his friend from the Wiesler faction. The friend he often talked with about his dreams for the future. His roommate in the dormitory. There was no doubt about it: it was Diio.

For some reason, though, the Diio in this dream was wearing a jet-black hood, and he wasn't looking at Zweit.

Zweit called out to his friend—though that too wasn't something he'd chosen to do.

"What do you want, Diio?"

"Hmm... 'Diio,' huh? That name brings back memories."

"What? I mean... You *are* Diio, right? What's going on? Why are you wearing that shabby old hood?"

But Diio didn't answer.

Left with no other option, Zweit began walking over to his friend. But he was interrupted when Diio finally spoke again.

“Zweit... I want to spend my life with her. Whatever it takes. But there’s someone standing in my way. And you know it, don’t you?”

“Ah... Yeah. You aren’t exactly gonna have an easy time with that love of yours. That much seems clear.”

“Right. And so, I... I’ve decided to get together with Croesus instead.”

“Wait. What? Why *Croesus*? Do you seriously think hooking up with him would be a win against my grandfather or something?”

But Diio wasn’t done yet.

No—if anything, he was only just getting started. His shoulders began to shake. He was *laughing*.

“You see, Zweit, that’s only true if I’m human...”

“H-Huh?”

“Yes... *I’ve rejected my humanity, Zweit!*”

“R-Rejected your humanity? What the hell *are* you, then?!”

Diio turned around, and his face was covered with a jade mask. If a certain Great Sage saw it, he’d no doubt remark, “Oh, isn’t this that mask that’s on exhibit at that one museum?”

A certain king had worn it and been buried with it, and nowadays it was on exhibit at a famous museum. It was *that* mask.

“This *power*! With this on my side, I’ll be able to screw whoever I want!”

“What do you mean, ‘screw’? Do you mean screwing someone over, or... Who would you even be ‘screwing,’ anyway? Grandfather? Celestina?!”

“I mean *both*! I’ll have to give my thanks to Croesus.”

As Diio said that, a spotlight shone into a corner of the room, illuminating...Croesus, effortlessly striking a sexy pose.

“Croesus! What the hell did you do to Diio?!”

“What, you ask? Why, I merely had him take part in one of my experiments! I didn’t expect it to go like *this*, but...it certainly is a fascinating result!”

“Seriously, though, what the *fuck* did you *do* to him?!”

“Oh, all *sorts* of things. Yes, yes, you wouldn’t *believe* some of the things I did to him... Aha ha ha!”

Croesus adjusted his glasses as he let out a maniacal laugh.

But this wasn’t over yet.

“So *this* is where you were, you leech, trying to hang off my Tina! There shall be no screwing here! I will *not* allow it!”

“Ugh... Grandfather? And you too—what are you implying with that ‘screw’?!”

“Why, *both* meanings, of course!!!”

Old Creston had burst into the scene all of a sudden, further raising the heat. And...maybe Zweit was just imagining it, but his grandfather was looking awfully *buff*.

No; he wasn’t imagining it. The man was so swole that it was clear even through his clothes. He looked a lot bigger than Zweit was used to.

“I’ve been training this body of mine to help me eliminate any *maggots* who approach my dear Tina. They shall not defeat these muscles of steel!”

Creston suddenly discarded his top, revealing the kind of physique that you’d never expect to see on a man his age.

He still had the head of an average old man, but it was paired with the torso of a built warrior, not a mage.

Zweit was left speechless from the shock.

“G-Grandfather... That... How did you—?”

“Pah, it was but a trifle! I merely asked the good Sir Zelos to train me up. Now, I can dispatch the average foe with naught but my fists!”

Another spotlight shone down—this time illuminating Zelos, who calmly puffed on a cigarette with a cool, nihilistic smile on his face. He gave a nonchalant thumbs-up, looking satisfied with the situation.

“Hey, Teach! What the *hell* do you think you’re up to?”

“Well, Creston here requested my help, you see. All I really did was teach him the basics... He really *did* take to them, though. He’s gone through quite the transformation, hasn’t he? I suppose he’s no longer the old man we knew...”

“It’s too late to start regretting that now! And I wanna know—what’d he even do to get that buff?”

“He’s... He’s been through hell. That’s all I can say. He’s broken out of the shackles of humanity. How scary, how scary... ♪”

“You— You don’t actually regret it at all, do you?! Heck, you’re...*proud* of it?! So you’ve gone crazy too, Teach... What’s wrong with everyone here?!”

But at this point, they were ignoring Zweit, and the two advanced life-forms were standing face-to-face with each other.

One had gone through a bodily transformation; the other, something perhaps more extreme. But neither seemed to be human anymore.

“This is getting interesting. What do you say we find out which of us has the strongest body?”

“Perfect. I shall burn you beyond a crisp!”

“Not if I take you down first. *WRYYYYYYYYYY!*”

“Let my flames turn you to ash! *Dragonfernal Destruction!*”

Both men were surrounded by roaring flames and a tangible aura of bloodlust.

The sheer pressure they were exuding was stifling; things were tense. Each man was fully prepared to kill the other. It was chaos, pure and simple.

“Hmm... You know, I think the two of us would get along well, Croesus. You’ve done a good job here.”

“I was thinking the same thing. You’ve certainly managed some intriguing results! Just how did you manage to give an old man like my grandfather a body like that? Aha ha ha... Truly, this is brilliant.”

“How the hell are you two so calm?! This is a disaster! *Do* something about it!”

Dreams being completely detached from reality was nothing new, but it felt like *this* dream was taking it too far.

Zelos and Croesus, a couple of complete strangers, were hitting it off perfectly, while in the background, a battle for the ages was playing out. It truly *was* chaos. *If this really is all just a dream, Zweit thought, then please let me wake up right now.*

It was then that the two fighters let out a joint, “Ah...”

Zweit looked back toward the battle, and... “Huh?!”

Coming at him from both sides was a flurry of punching fists, each wrapped in an inferno.

They were both physical attacks—capable of delivering an impact that’d pulverize every limb on Zweit’s body—and heat-based attacks that would burn even his bones to smithereens. He’d gotten caught up in the cross fire in the worst way possible. Just a few more moments, and he’d be nothing more than a pile of sorry remains.

Zweit felt his conscious fading away, and then—

“AAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Whoa! Jeez... Don’t surprise me like that, Zweit.”

He was awake.

Panting, he scanned his surroundings. He was in the same old dorm room as always.

Looking through the window to his side, he saw little birds flitting about in the yard. It was the very definition of a tranquil morning.

His room was clean too. Perfectly clean. There wasn’t a single bit of rubbish in sight.

And by his bed was his roommate Diio, who’d suddenly leaped to his feet when Zweit had shouted.

Yes, it was Diio, the one who’d inspired his nightmare.

“So it *was* all just a dream, huh...? What a weird dream.”

“Weird enough to make you spring up out of your bed something crazy, by the looks of it. Mind if I ask what it was about?”

“Please don’t.” A pause. Then: “Uh... Diio? What’s that mask you’re holding?”

“Oh, this? It’s something Croesus gave me. Looks kinda shady, though. Not sure what I should do with it.”

It wasn’t a *jade* mask, but a stone mask. And it had an incredibly eerie aura to it.

There was something like a jewel inlaid into the mask’s forehead.

“Croesus, huh...? Look. I won’t get into it, but just...please never put that thing on.”

“Like *hell* I would! I was just wondering how to get rid of it, that’s all. It was a present, though, so I’m not sure I can just throw it out like that... I don’t know what to do.”

“Good. If it’s something *he’s* collected, it’s gotta be crazy in some way or another.”

“Yeah, I’m with you. Anyway—it’s almost time for breakfast. You gonna get changed? I’ll head to the dining hall first.”

“All right. Before you go, though, I wanna know... What’re you gonna do with that thing? Seriously.”

“Put it in a box and seal it up, probably. I get the feeling something terrible might happen if someone gets their hands on it.”

“That’s...probably a good idea.”

Zweit breathed a sigh of relief at his friend’s rational response.

And so the present from Croesus was sealed away.

Zweit resolved to shake off the nightmare, get himself together and go about his day as always. For now, his top priority was breakfast.

But as soon as he took another look, the mask was suddenly nowhere to be found.

Maybe some *other* suspicious item of Croesus’s had come to take it away?

But Zweit had his doubts.

“Please tell me that dream wasn’t a premonition...”

As Zweit got changed, he could do nothing but pray that what he’d seen in his nightmare would remain nothing more than a nightmare.

A cold wind had blown over what should have been a nice, tranquil morning.

*

That noon, the three Solistia children met up at a sidewalk café inside the academy.

“He’s coming here today... Teach is coming... Honestly, I feel like it’ll be awkward to meet him. We still haven’t gotten far with our magic.”

“You’re right. Should we really be meeting him again just yet? I’m worried.”

“Is he really such a scary man? This... Zelos, you called him?”

All morning, Zweit and Celestina had been unable to calm their nerves, and Croesus was struggling to figure out why they were acting like that.

Croesus hadn’t even met Zelos before, after all. He’d *heard* about him, but he didn’t have a clear picture of the man.

He’d heard that he was “an incredibly wise Great Sage.”

That he was “a hermit who loves farming more than anything else.”

That he was “a brilliant mage who’s also absurdly good in a hand-to-hand fight.”

In short, everything he’d heard about the man made it clear he wasn’t your average individual.

He’d heard similar things about Zelos’s personality. Apparently, he was “mild-mannered, but also kind of twisted; a savior to orphans, but a merciless destroyer to his foes.”

Honestly, it didn’t make much sense. Just thinking about it, it seemed odd to say that the kind of individual who went around slaughtering people was “mild-mannered” or a “savior” to anyone. And using the term “twisted” to describe someone who gave money to orphans felt like a contradiction too. Was this

“Zelos” a coldhearted killer or a benevolent old man? Croesus just couldn’t tell.

Further, as someone who’d apparently spent a long time traveling the world and taking part in battle after battle, it’d make sense for him to have a brutal nature. But...then he was also a hermit who wanted nothing more than to live a modest life on a farm? The more Croesus thought about it, the less sense it made.

On top of it all, Zweit and Celestina had been saying that Zelos’s personality resembled Croesus’s own. And that only made it harder to imagine the man.

“I don’t even know what to say at this point. It really sounds like this man and I are polar opposites...”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. You two are gonna get along great, I guarantee it.”

“I agree. His mind works sort of like yours, Brother, and I think his principles are similar to yours as well.”

“But I’m hardly as twisted as the man you’re making him out to be! At the end of the day, I just don’t care for anything apart from my research, and I don’t go out of my way to get involved with other people.”

In their minds, Zweit and Celestina were going, *See?! That’s what we’re talking about! That is what you’d call “twisted”!*

They didn’t say it out loud, though. Croesus remained blissfully unaware.

“When’s Teach gonna be getting here?”

“From what Miska was saying, I think he should be arriving in the afternoon. Though I won’t be able to meet him today, unfortunately. I have plans to teach magic to some of the younger students...”

“Me too. I’ve got a meeting for a faction thing. Ugh, what a pain in the ass...”

“I suppose that means I’ll be the one to meet him, then. It *will* be my first time meeting the man, though; you’re aware of that, yes?”

“Please rest assured.”

The three siblings let out a combined “Whoa?!”

A calm and collected maid had sprung up out of nowhere.

She adjusted her glasses, her expression unchanging.

“Miska, since when were you...”

“You really do like to appear out of thin air, don’t you? Please stop surprising me like that.”

“Is it just me, Miska, or have you got a lot more...energy to you lately?”

Miska *had* seemed more upbeat as of late. More than you would’ve expected her to be. And some of the things she did didn’t really make sense.

She *looked* calm and collected, but from time to time she’d go all-in on playing the fool in order to tease Celestina in some way or another.

And of course, that change to her behavior was affecting Zweit and Croesus as well.

There were a lot of things they wanted to say.

“According to my own information, Sir Zelos should be arriving in the harbor of Cezan shortly past noon, before reaching Stihla approximately three hours after that. I hear something about him having made a spectacular magic tool of sorts? Regardless, I will be the one to show him the way here.”

“A-A *magic tool*? Made by a *Great Sage*?!”

“Croesus! Not so loud!”

“Remember, we have to keep what we know about Master a secret! You can’t just say his job title out loud like that!”

“My apologies. You piqued my interest, so I got a little...carried away. Really, though, what sort of magic tool could it possibly— No. Now that I’ve thought about it for a moment, I assume from the context that it would be some sort of tool for transportation?”

Croesus was all about research, and he had a particular fondness for magic tools. His synapses were firing at full speed right now.

Apart from a select few people, no one knew yet that Zelos had made a motorbike. Everyone else only knew that he’d made *something*, if that.

Sure, that “something” had been made by repurposing a bunch of magic tools

he'd had on hand, and it was built like a big toy. But even then, it was impressively fast and sturdy.

Not to mention, it had been made with steel, mithril, and orichalcum, and fitted with mysterious magic tools that gave it insane attack power. So calling it a toy was probably doing it a disservice.

Even just the materials that had been used to make it were crazy enough that people would be desperate to get their hands on it after naught but a single glance. It used the scales and carapace of a black dragon, after all, allowing it to repel magical attacks with ease.

The problems, if anything, were that Zelos had prioritized the motorbike's looks when he was making it, and that even he didn't fully understand what it was capable of. Back when he'd started making it, he'd said to himself, "First of all, I guess I want it to look cool. I want it to look like a certain rider's bike, but at the same time, I'd also love if it could transform..." Not that he'd told all that to anyone else.

Yes—he'd even considered making a motorbike that could transform. But ultimately, he'd figured that would lead to all sorts of structural problems, so he'd gone with something safer.

"Uh, Miska... Even if you get right onto a carriage from Cezan, it usually takes, like, another half a day to get here, you know? What the hell's Teach gone and made this time?"

"Who knows? Apart from the fact that it will inevitably be something that flies in the face of common sense, of course. This *is* Sir Zelos we're talking about."

"Yes. I don't think anything Master makes could surprise me at this point. I assume it's some sort of convenient tool, at least..."

"So you're assuming that any tools he makes would be convenient? Milady, allow me to ask you: would you use the word 'convenient' to describe farming tools that soar through the sky at unbelievable speed?"

"Wha—?!"

A while back, Zelos had made some winnower prototypes that had ended up taking to the skies and disappearing over the horizon. But only a handful of

people knew the story of that particular disaster.

Miska hadn't been there at the time, and yet it looked like, somehow, she knew what had happened. The lesson, it seemed, being that you could never make light of Miska's—or, sorry, the duke's—information network.

“Why would farming tools *fly*? Seriously, what's Teach been getting up to back there?”

“I can't even hazard a guess as to what Master would have been trying to do with that. Am I just not well studied enough to understand, perhaps...?”

“Couldn't it just have been some failed experiment? I don't know what he was trying to do, but I'd assume that either he made a mistake with the magic formula, or, conversely, that he made it too powerful.”

“Looks like you've got a pretty good understanding of Teach already, Croesus...”

“Yes. Why is it that I feel you have a better understanding of him than the two of us, who spent months learning from him?”

Croesus hadn't been there when it had happened, but his guess was right on the money.

It just went to show the similarities between him and Zelos.

Both of them tended to take their hobbies to the extremes; they were practically identical in that sense. The only real difference between them was that Zelos was the outdoors type, and Croesus was decidedly not.

“Being honest here, Croesus—if you learned hand-to-hand combat too, not just magic, and got insanely strong, you'd pretty much be Teach. Seriously, your personalities are identical.”

“Master kept his things clean, though! He's not terrible at that like Croesus is.”

“Ah, you're right. Croesus's room is a hazard zone, yeah...”

“Are the two of you really just using this Mr. Zelos as an excuse to bad-mouth me? I feel like you're simply insulting me indirectly at this point.”

And they *were* doing just that, but...they weren't wrong.

Zelos might have been a careless middle-aged man, but he was at least all right at keeping things tidy.

He was worlds apart from Croesus and the unspeakable terrors that formed in *his* room, at least.

"Milady, it is almost time. If we do not get going soon, your *devotees* will likely make their way here themselves. Croesus's fans will be here too, so I imagine it will become rather crowded before long."

Zweit and Croesus looked stunned. "Devotees?!"

"Ever since milady has grown close with Miss Ulna, many of the younger girls at the academy have begun idolizing her. To the extent that they have professed their 'devotion' to her."

"I thought Croesus was bad enough; what are *you* getting up to, Celestina?! Why are you going out and making younger girls fall for you in your spare time?!"

To be precise, it had all started with Celestina just teaching other students magic out of the kindness of her heart, and that had eventually led to the "devotion" Miska was talking about.

It wasn't necessarily love—or rather, it wasn't a yuri kind of situation. They were just idolizing her.

"They're all good girls! But I have to say, I don't quite understand what they mean when they talk about their 'devotion' to me. What could they be talking about? It's especially odd coming from some of them who are in the same year as me... Why would they look up to someone who's the same age as they are?"

"So you're not even aware you're doing it, huh? I guess being innocent about it *is* just like you, though..."

Celestina didn't quite grasp what the other girls meant by the word.

All of the younger girls who idolized her were stragglers who were bad at using magic. They'd started to have an easier time using it thanks to the formulas she'd improved, and that, paired with the kindness she showed when

teaching them magic, had led them to harbor strong adoration toward her.

It was only reinforcing her reputation as the “Magic Angel”—not that the girl herself had ever heard that nickname.

So many people looked up to her for how she’d turned her situation around, and she was even being called a prodigy now. But still, there was barely anyone who came up and *talked* to her, so she was still convinced that Carosty and Ulna were her only friends.

The long years she’d spent as a loner had made her bad at realizing when people actually liked her.

“Anyway, getting back to the topic—Croesus, I want you to greet Teach for us. You wanted to give him your thanks for that ring you’ve been using as a magic conduit, right? Also, Miska... Sorry to ask, but go along with him, please.”

“Oh, you’re right! I’d forgotten about that. That ring really *is* spectacular, though. Well, then... I suppose it may indeed be good for me to meet the man directly and ask him to teach me. It’d be a waste to let this opportunity slip.”

“Of course, Sir Zweit. Knowing Sir Croesus, he would most likely insist on bringing along some report he is working on; then he would wander about the city, not knowing where Sir Zelos is staying. And along the way, his eye would be caught by a vendor selling suspicious wares, stopping him in his tracks entirely; of that I am certain. We can hardly allow him to cause any further trouble to the academy like that, so I believe it would be most pertinent for me to meet Sir Zelos first and show him to the dormitory.”

“Yeah. Thanks. I get that it might be weird for me to ask a favor like that when you’re *Celestina’s* attendant, not mine, but...well, Croesus doesn’t know what Teach looks like anyway. And it’s not like there’s anyone else who does either. I’m guessing Dad’s arranged a room for him at an inn, but even if Croesus knew where that inn was, he’d take detours on the way there. And it’d probably take him a while to get ready to go out.”

“Yes. Every last maid serving Sir Croesus has fled, after all. If not for Miss Yi Ling, I imagine Sir Croesus would have long ago rotted away within the refuse pile that is his room. There is no doubt in my mind.”

Miska didn't mince words, even when it came to people from the family she served. But that willingness to say things straight was part of what made her so valuable.

She never revealed private information to outside parties either, so the head of the family placed a lot of trust in her.

She really was a brilliant maid. Even if that didn't quite extend to her attitude...

"Well, then, Sir Croesus. I will come to pick you up when it is time."

"Sure. I'll be getting some things ready while I wait, then. There are some topics that I'm very interested to hear Mr. Zelos's opinion on."

"Ugh... Do I really have to go to another one of those pointless strategy meetings? I don't even wanna see the faces of those bloodline supremacist morons right now..."

"Meanwhile, I should go and fulfill my promise. I have to do whatever little I can to spread the word of what Master taught me."

Celestina was all fired up to teach the proper understanding of magic to her juniors, who were badly struggling with using it.

Among those juniors she was teaching were a handful who were trying to bring her into the Solistia faction—not that she was aware of that. Without even knowing it, she'd come to be seen as something of a pioneer for the faction, which was rapidly gaining strength.

That was in part due to her ability to use magic that had been optimized by a certain Great Sage...though everyone's lips were tightly sealed on that matter. There was a concerted effort to avoid leaking information to competing factions. And besides, the magic formulas that Celestina had improved herself were widely circulating too, including within the Solistia faction.

For now, the only ones who could use Zelos's magic formulas were a select few mages who could be trusted.

"Anyway, that should be it for today. I'll pay the bill."

"Thank you, Brother. In that case, I'll excuse myself."

“Heh heh heh... Now that I think about it, I *have* been wanting to talk about magic with Mr. Zelos, so this might just be the perfect opportunity. This is looking very interesting all of a sudden...”

Croesus was just focused on Croesus things.

And he seemed to be looking forward to the meeting from the bottom of his heart.

“Sir Croesus, please tell me you do not intend on meeting with Sir Zelos dressed in that robe? It is clearly dirty. I suggest it would be wise to change into something else. In fact, I believe you received a new robe from your family just yesterday, did you not?”

“Can’t I just go wearing this? I don’t think the dirt stands out too much...”

Zweit, Celestina and Miska replied to *that* all at once: “Of *course* you can’t!”

Croesus preferred to wear blue robes. And a big reason for that was that it was harder to notice when they were dirty.

Originally, students at the academy had their robe color determined for them by their ability, just like other mages. Students with the worst results had worn gray robes; the next step up had been black, then red, or specifically crimson. White was the only color that wasn’t granted to students; white robes were reserved as the proof that a mage was part of the highest echelons of national defense.

However, there had been problems with treating students the same as fully-fledged mages. First of all, it had contributed to rampant discrimination among students who weren’t very good at using magic, as they had been clearly identifiable by the color of their robes.

It had also been expensive to buy robes of the specific colors designated by the academy; even buying a gray robe, the cheapest color, had at the very least placed a monetary burden on a student from the average commoner family. That had given rise to a flood of complaints, especially since there were more students from commoner families—who’d pushed themselves hard to get their children enrolled at the academy—than there were from noble families and wealthy merchant families.

Ultimately, the academy's rules had been relaxed to let students wear robes of whichever color they wished—the only exception among colored robes being red ones, which were reserved for the academy to award to particularly high-achieving students.

Students could still wear the same colors from back then as their uniforms, but it was up to the individual student to choose which color they wore. So Zweit preferred red robes, while Croesus tended toward blue.

The red robes granted by the academy carried a strong formal connotation, so not many students actually wore them. Zweit was an exception, then, though it really just came down to his own personal preferences.

Of course, Croesus had been given a red robe as well, but...

"I'd really rather not wear red. It doesn't suit me. If I have to change into something, I suppose the blue robe I received from my family would be the better option... Oh. The question *then* is, where did I put it...?"

"You... You only got that thing just recently, right? Has it seriously gotten lost in your trash heap *already*?"

"Nobody's been helping me out. Even though I have all of these magic tools with fascinating effects... It makes them failures as researchers, if you ask me."

Zweit had to resist the urge to retort with *What do you mean, "fascinating"?! More like dangerous! What kind of idiot would ever want to go into that hazard zone of a room?!*

But that was that, and Croesus went off to start looking for his new robe. His room only got messier in the process, of course.

This was how it happened. Perhaps tonight would be the night another mysterious creature was let loose upon the world from his garbage heap?

It really was a mystery how Croesus hadn't died in there yet.

*

"Urgh... Another day, another pointless meeting. That was a waste of time..."

"Yeah. The battle strategies you come up with really make me think, though, Zweit. You even think about what kind of losses each strategy would lead to, in

lots of detail, and then you use that to pick out whichever strategy minimizes those losses... It's cool seeing you work through it."

"Yeah, yeah. Knock it off. I mean, hopefully we'll never even have to use them. The best-case scenario is that there's no war in the first place."

"You're not wrong, but you can't just assume things will always be that easy. Aren't *you* the one who hammered that into everyone, Zweit?"

"Well, yeah. That's why we have to prepare for the worst—to help us keep the peace. If we're led by idiots who only care about racking up achievements for themselves, people will end up dying for nothing."

Zweit and Diio were coming out of another of one of the Wiesler faction's battle strategy meetings.

It hadn't even resembled a fruitful discussion. The bloodline supremacists had been spouting their overly naive strategies the whole time, and as usual, it had fallen upon Zweit to refute them all.

It had happened so many times by now that he was sick of it. And with the meeting finished, he was just standing beside the pathway, sighing.

"Hm?"

"Ugh..."

Of course, other faction members would be walking past as well...but this was really the *last* day Zweit wanted to run into people he didn't like. And here came some of the bloodline supremacists, including Samtrol and Bremait.

"You call that a greeting? Look at you, thinking you're a big man..."

The moment they'd run into each other, Samtrol was trying to pick a fight. It was enough to make Zweit just a little irritated. But at the same time, Samtrol had been behaving oddly as of late, and Zweit figured this might be an opportunity to try and trick him into revealing something.

"You're not much better, are you? I hear you've been sneaking around the place lately. Keeping company with some nasty people. Trying to figure out how to get rid of me, huh?"

"Wh-What are you talking about! I won't abide by you slandering my name

with these baseless lies!”

“Hmm... What was it I heard the other day? You were having a secret meeting with some shady figures at a tavern; was that it? Who knows *what* you might be trying to pull...”

Zweit flashed a knowing smile. But it was a bluff; he was just making things up, with no proof whatsoever.

Samtrol didn’t know that, though. And having recently heard some scary rumors about the Duke of Solistia’s information network, he was beginning to go deathly pale.

His reaction left Zweit utterly convinced that *Samtrol* *was*, indeed, planning something.

“I don’t even know what you could be talking about! How far are you going to go with these lies of yours?!”

“If it’s nothing, then don’t worry about it. Just pretend you didn’t hear me say anything, right? Well, I don’t know exactly what to expect from whoever you met up with, but I’ve got a trump card of my own. And you can expect me to use it. Got it?”

“A trump card? What?”

A cold sweat was forming on *Samtrol*’s brow. It sounded like his plot had been found out, and that Zweit was taking countermeasures against it to boot. He really wanted to know what Zweit’s “trump card” was too.

In reality, of course, Zweit was just bluffing. But *Samtrol* had no way of knowing that for sure, and he became convinced that it was a secret he had to drag out of Zweit, whatever it took. At the same time, he could hardly just *ask* for it...

If he demanded an explanation out of Zweit here, the inevitable reply would be, “Why are you so desperate to know?” He might as well confess then and there that he was planning something.

With a triumphant smile, Zweit delivered the finishing blow.

“Eh, don’t worry about it. More importantly, I wonder what’s going to happen

to you when your little plan fails? Heck, even if you succeed, I don't think you're gonna like where it ends up for you."

"*Ngh*— Wh-What is this...? What are you implying?!"

"What, indeed? I don't think I really need to tell you that, though, do I? We're not exactly close enough friends to be sharing secrets. How about you investigate it yourself, if you're so interested? Or, what—are you just some loser who can't do anything without relying on your lackeys?"

"H-How *dare* you..."

Samtrol was glaring at Zweit, an infuriated look on his face.

Looking back at him, Zweit thought, *Whoa, he's really screwed this up. I figured I'd try bluffing, but I never thought he'd be so easy to read.* Frankly, he was amazed by how easy it'd been to fool Samtrol. He'd confirmed his suspicions now, but he still kept up a mask, his expression steady.

It was an attitude befitting a member of a ducal house. Samtrol being so obvious made Zweit just about want to burst into laughter, but he made sure to hold it in.

"Make the most of your freedom while you still have it. You'll probably all be executed once this is done and dusted."

"H-Hmph! I'm part of the Wiesler house! I have royal blood flowing through my veins! They could never do that to—"

"They could. Your mother may be the paternal sister of my grandfather, but even the Wiesler house won't be able to protect you. Besides, I'm higher in the chain of succession than you are. There's nothing to stop me from dealing with you however I want. You've gone too far, Samtrol, and you're about to find out what happens."

People of royal lineage were given preferential treatment in society. It was generally said that whatever crimes they committed, their status as royals was inviolable, and others were unable to pass judgment on them.

Samtrol's mother was the younger half sister of the previous king—which also meant that she was the younger half sister of Zweit's grandfather Creston, the

previous Duke of Solistia. But women were low in the line of succession to the throne, and as a result, Samtrol—who was only in said line of succession due to his mother—wasn't high up it either. He was seventeenth, to be precise. Creston, meanwhile, had been second in the line of succession. And that meant that his grandson Zweit was fairly high up it as well, sitting at sixth in line.

People of royal pedigree could only be judged by other royals, and the higher you were in the line of succession, the more clout your opinion had. In other words, the Solistia ducal house held more than enough authority to have Samtrol executed.

“Well, it doesn't really bother me. It's *your* problem now. You'd better start thinking about your future.”

With that, Zweit and Diio left the scene.

As for Samtrol and Bremait, who were left behind...

“Even if this goes well, we're *screwed*. What the fuck are we meant to do now?!”

“Yeah... What do we do, Samtrol? The Solistia house is our full-on enemy now. Even if we manage to get rid of Zweit, we'll be...”

Both of them were pale. Of course, they hadn't realized that Zweit had been bluffing.

In fact, Zweit's imposing attitude had only made his words sound that much more credible, and the way he'd dangled the threat of danger over their heads had shaken their composure.

Above all, though, was the dominating presence of Zweit's father, Duke Delthasis. Or...perhaps “terrifying” was the better word than “dominating.”

The Solistia house would have an easy time crushing them, evidence or no. And the Wiesler house wouldn't protect them. Or, rather, it *couldn't* protect them. The gap in the two houses' authority was simply too large.

Samtrol was finally realizing how shortsighted he'd been. But it was too late now.

If he hadn't gone and requested a hit on Zweit, he would've still had a future

ahead of him. Now, though, nothing awaited him but death.

“Shit! Now that it’s come to this, I’ll make sure to drag that bastard down with me, if it’s the last thing I do...”

A fool was always going to be a fool.

Samtrol’s arrogance made him incapable of rational thought. And even the bloodline supremacists who’d been watching from the sidelines were starting to fear for their own safety now. Meanwhile...

This is bad. I don’t wanna die alongside an idiot like this!

Bremait had made a decision: he’d sell Samtrol out to save his own skin. His own safety was his top priority.

At the end of the day, the bloodline supremacists were just a collection of people looking for power and authority. There was no such thing as trust or camaraderie between them.

One way or another, the wheels of conspiracy were beginning to spin.

Chapter 5: The Old Guy Crosses Swords with an S-rank Guild Master

Zelos brought his magic-powered motorbike to a stop on a hill not far from Stihla.

From here, he and his companions would be walking the rest of this way to the city. But there was one little problem to deal with first...

“Blegh! I feel sho grosh...”

“I think I’m going to— Blargh!”

Lena and Jeanne had gotten an impressive case of travel sickness.

The two of them had been perfectly fine on the ship to Cezan, but they’d struggled to endure their first trip by trailer. Zelos had made sure to drive nice and safely this time; that wasn’t the issue. They just weren’t used to this particular form of transport.

To people born in this world, traveling at sixty kilometers an hour was uncharted territory.

“Never thought the two of you would get so motion sick! You were perfectly fine on the ship...”

“Right? We were just going in a straight line this time! On a road!”

“What about that was— Flurgh. It was rocking all over the damn place...”

“I thought I was going to die! My body kept getting jostled from side to side, and you were going around every curve so fast, and...”

They hadn’t taken any big turns, per se, so it had been a “straight line” in that sense. But there’d been the occasional curve or hill, which had caused the trailer to shake.

Worse, while the road was paved, it was paved with *cobblestone*, which made for a pretty uneven surface—a surface on which Zelos had thundered past all of

the merchants traveling in their horse-drawn carriages. He *had* stopped for a few breaks to let Lena and Jeanne rest, but...

Well, the problem was really just that the motorbike and its trailer were so much faster than a horse-drawn carriage. You could only do much to mitigate that. And for Lena and Jeanne, who'd never built up a resistance to that kind of speed, it had been a hellish journey. You could hardly blame them for getting motion sick.

"What's *up* with you two, seriously...? You were throwin' up like crazy on the ship, but now you're— *Blegh!*"

"I-Is this really made for people to ride o— *Glurgh!*"

"I mean...it *is* a motorbike. It's fast. I guess it makes sense for you to end up like this the first time you ride something so fast."

"It seems we were closer to the city than I'd been expecting. Even with breaks, that was less than a three-hour trip, wasn't it? I thought we would've run into some kind of trouble on the way—bandits, or a wheel coming off, or what have you."

By carriage, it was about a ten-hour trip, but by motorbike, it didn't take long at all.

The motorbike was just that much faster. But it certainly hadn't *felt* faster to two of the passengers. For Jeanne and Lena, every moment spent in that trailer had felt like an eternity. Right at the start, they'd enjoyed watching the scenery whiz past them, but it hadn't taken long at all for that to become the last thing on their minds as the travel sickness hit them hard. From then on, they'd felt like the living dead.

It was sort of like an amusement park opening up a new thrill ride that visitors hopped onto with excitement, only for most of them to have fainted by the time they got off.

"Well, we can see the city now, so how about we walk from here? That's probably a good idea anyway—I think we'd make a scene if we went all the way to the city in this. It's not exactly a horse-drawn carriage."

"Sounds good. I don't think these two could handle hopping back on the

trailer anyway. And I'm pretty sure we'll make it in time now, easy. So yeah, let's walk."

That was Iris's opinion, at least; Lena and Jeanne weren't exactly in any state to give their own input. This was the reverse of how things had gone on the ship.

It took the two of them everything they had to simply follow along behind Zelos and Iris, their faces pale.

After twenty minutes of nice, slow walking, the group finally passed through the gate to Stihla.

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The city of Stihla revolved around the Istol Academy of Magic. It was something akin to a college town.

There were school buildings in three main locations, as if they were encircling the rest of the city: one location each for the elementary, middle, and high school courses. Add to that the dormitories where the students lived, and it was clear: the school grounds were *massive*.

The academy mostly taught alchemy, medicine, metal engraving, and magic, alongside a bevy of more minor subjects. But the buildings where these subjects were taught were scattered all around, giving the academy a bit of a chaotic layout.

In the past, noble students and commoner students had been divided into different school buildings. But as more and more commoners had started aiming to become mages, there had been problems with discrimination. Angered students had asked, for example, *Why do the nobles get to hog all those empty buildings when there are more of us than there are of them?* The magic nobles had held a lot of authority back then, but with time, the factions had begun to gain influence, eventually triggering a conflict that had swept up most of the commoner students. Ultimately, the commoners had come out on top, repealed the discriminatory policies, and successfully desegregated the academy.

Now, though, those factions were themselves getting too accustomed to the

influence they'd gained. It was ironic; they were becoming the very power structures they'd risen up to overthrow.

One way or another, there were still some students who were better off than others. And so the Stihla mercenaries' guild, located within the college town, was sometimes a way for poorer students to earn some money and help pay for their school expenses.

Working as a mercenary would also help your grades at the academy a little—though with most students attending the academy to try and get a job in *research*, there weren't as many students who did that nowadays. That shift toward research had been another outcome of the factional rivalry.

At the same time, it had seen the academy start making more requests to the guild for things like the collection of medicinal herbs. And so mercenaries who wanted to take on those sorts of requests had come to gather in Stihla. There were also a lot of requests from individuals who wanted to test the effect of a potion or such that they'd made for the first time, specifically by having someone drink it. Put straight, they were *human experimentation* requests.

Any mercenary who took on that sort of job would be putting their body on the line. But it also meant receiving free potions, and getting paid for it to boot, which could make those jobs very alluring.

They were very popular among mercenaries who were strapped for cash.

Of course, particularly dangerous substances were tested on criminals instead—though once they were found to be safe, the next step was still to test them on mercenaries to find out what exactly they did. If all went well, the potions would be sold to merchants, providing valuable income that would help pay the academy's operating funds.

Considering all that, you'd be justified in saying that the so-called Magic Academy of Istol was really more of a technical college, focused primarily on training up the next generation of crafters.

"So this is the mercenaries' guild... They've got a pretty nice-looking building, huh~?"

"Yes—compared to the one in Santor, at least. *That* one just feels like your

average tavern. Especially when it starts to get full of drunks around sunset. This one gives off the vibes of a fancy steak house, if anything...”

“You’ve been to the mercenaries’ guild before, Zelos?”

“Oh, I go there all the time. It functions as a tavern too, you know—I’ve been there drinking with the dwarves from Hamber Construction. The food’s good too. And, you know, I’m amazed they can still run as a guild, with how noisy it always is.”

“Well, yeah, it *is* always full of mercenaries. We have to deal with a lotta stuff there too...”

Mercenaries’ guilds were gathering spots for rough-and-tumble mercenaries, so a lot of them were taverns.

The one in Stihla was frequented by students, though, so it had been made to look more like a restaurant. And it *operated* as a restaurant too.

“Oh, Mister, that reminds me—have you got a guild card? It’s pretty much, like, your ID as a mercenary.”

“I’ve had a lot going on lately, so the duke said he’d prepare one for me. Apparently I need to hand this letter to the guild master to get it, though.”

Zelos pulled a letter out from an envelope that also contained a map and some other things.

“Must be nice knowing a duke. The three of *us* had to save up bit by bit before we were able to register...”

“Makes me feel like we wasted our time going through all that... Damn geezer just gets to cheat his way in.”

“I don’t know exactly how much it costs to get registered, but I’m confident I would’ve been able to earn it anyway, you know? Not that I need to bother, mind you~. And I’d rather not become a famous crafter in the process.”

Zelos could feel the three young women’s piercing glares.

He hadn’t been *trying* to annoy them, but the more he spoke, the more he made them feel he had a massive unfair advantage.

The thing was, though, the entire crafting process in *Swords & Sorceries* had been incredibly realistic, requiring manual labor to make everything from items to weapons. Crafting things in-game had taken just about as long as it would have taken in real life.

Even if you were just, say, forging a basic sword, it'd end up blunt if you started cutting corners partway through. You couldn't let your mind waver for even a moment; it was proper craftsmanship. The game's mechanics were terribly harsh when determining whether your craft was a success or a failure, and the crafting process just *felt* real.

Sure, *now* Zelos had full-blown cheat abilities at his disposal. But he'd also put in the effort to earn them, even if he'd made that effort in an online game. He was simply harvesting the fruits of his labor—including his transmutation abilities, which were the culmination of all those efforts. Not that that was apparent to Iris, who'd never been a crafter, nor to Jeanne and Lena...

Zelos knew practically everything about *Swords & Sorceries*. Noticing the similarities between that world and this one had helped him in his crafting—and it had also gotten him wondering whether the world from the game might actually have been a copy of the one he was in now.

Right now, though, that meant nothing to the other three. They still saw him as having a massive unfair advantage.

His companions' irritated stares still piercing his back, Zelos headed over to the guild's reception. He called out to a young man there who seemed to be a receptionist.

"Excuse me. We're here to accept the guard request for the upcoming student trip. Are we in the right place?"

"Yes, this is the place. We were actually just about to close the reception for the day—you're lucky you made it in time!"

"Oh? Looks like we were cutting it close, eh? Anyway, I was told I'd need a guild card or a letter of introduction if I want to accept the request. I have the latter; where should I take it?"

"A letter, you say? Would you mind if I take a look?"

“Here you go. I was told to hand it to the guild master. Would you be able to pass it to them for me?”

“One moment, please... Huh?! Th-This is...”

The receptionist had noticed that the letter bore the seal of the Solistia ducal house.

Trying to stifle his shock, the receptionist stood up without delay and disappeared through a door in the back.

“He...sure moved quickly there, didn’t he? Looked like his arms and legs were moving strangely too. Did my letter surprise him that much?”

“C’mon, Mister... You gave him a letter from the *duke*! Of *course* that’s gonna happen.”

“Do you have any common sense up there in that head of yours, Zelos? I swear...”

“Whoa. *Lena’s* saying you don’t have any common sense? That’s gotta hurt.”

As Jeanne was saying, that remark stung all the more coming from someone who spent her spare time preying on boys.

Regardless, the Solistia ducal house was related to the royal family. You couldn’t blame the young receptionist for springing to his feet like that as soon as he saw the family seal.

Most of the influential people Zelos had known throughout his life had been entrepreneurs or bigwigs at financial conglomerates. He still didn’t entirely understand the weight a noble’s words could carry.

At the same time, it didn’t have any effect on his own life, so he’d never really *tried* to understand it either.

Zelos clearly didn’t think the same way as people born in this world. It was just another example of the big gap between reincarnators and the world’s native residents.

Before long, the receptionist came back, another man in his twenties behind him. But something about this second man seemed...off.

He had beautiful looks, but his demeanor somehow seemed weirdly flirty. And the floral scent of his perfume, combined with his makeup, gave Zelos the willies.

He was very *effeminate*.

“So *you’re* the Mr. Zelos the duke was recommending to us, mmm? I’m Seyfon, and I’m in charge of this branch of the guild. Nice to meet you, hun! ≡”

“H-How polite of you. I’m Zelos, yes, but... I’m curious. What exactly did the duke say about me? I can’t say I’ve got a good feeling about this...”

“Hmm... To give it to you straight, he asked me to qualify you as an S-rank mercenary. Gosh, the things I’m asked to do for my *friends*...”

“Friends? Forget about the whole ‘S-rank’ thing for a second—what’s your relationship with His Grace?”

“Ehee hee hee... Curious, are we? But I’m sorry to say, that’s an s-e-c-r-e-t. A *secret*!”

The man was annoying, and kind of creepy. Neither of those things were exactly endearing him to Zelos.

But despite his demeanor and the fact that he just looked like an attractive young man, he was a skilled fighter—no doubt about that. He carried himself well; he wasn’t leaving himself open.

All the same, he’d rekindled a long-forgotten fear in Zelos.

“Now, getting right down to business, I’d *love* for you to show me how *strong* you are, Mr. Zelos. You sure...*look* like a pretty tough man, at least.”

For just a moment, Zelos felt a keen, cutting aura coming from this effeminate man. He was probably the strongest person in the guild. But while he might have far outclassed every other mercenary here, Zelos struggled to see him as much of a threat by his own standards. Well—not a threat in *combat*, at least...

“So... You’re asking me to spar with you, yes? A ‘let your blade do the talking’ kind of thing?”

“Exactly that! Oh, just the *thought* of going up against someone who might be able to overpower me... It kind of gets me wet! ≡”

Zelos's whole party quipped at once: "Gets *what* wet?!"

Seyfon seemed to be wiggling his...lower body, as if he were trying to reawaken some sensation he'd forgotten long ago.

For some reason, Zelos was getting a mental image of a frame focused on Seyfon's crotch as a sound effect played: *SCHWING!* Something instinctual within Zelos was telling him, *This guy's bad news! Run for it! Run as fast as you can!*

There was clearly *something* weird going on here.

"Uh, you see, I'm actually a pacifist, so—"

"Really? A man who managed to survive alone out in the Far-Flung Green Depths? Calling himself a pacifist? Oh, you're *hilarious*..."

"Did he *have* to include that in the letter?! Ugh. I kind of just want to forget about this whole thing and run away..."

"Ooh, here's an idea: if you still want to say you're a pacifist, then how about you show me what you're made of in *bed*? Front or back, top or bottom; I don't mind. I'll let you choose! Promise me that, and I'll give you the guild card—and so, so much more... ≡"

"I'll, uh... I'll take you up on the fight. That sounds better than the whole 'bed' thing, at least."

"Aww. What a shame."

Zelos had decided to go with what sounded like the safer option. And Seyfon seemed to be genuinely disappointed by his decision.

It was around this point that Zelos realized for sure: this guild master was after him.

"Wait a sec... Seyfon?! As in 'Seyfon the Spark'? The S-rank mercenary?!"

"Oh! Sounds like boob-lady over there has heard of me! You know, I haven't had as many people recognize me lately..."

"Don't call me 'boob-lady'! And how could I *not* know you?! You're one of the strongest swordsmen there is! You took down a wyvern and a hell chimera with

a rapier!”

“Oh; I *did* do that, didn’t I? That takes me back...”

Seyfon started spacing out as he remembered his past.

Seyfon the Spark had been nothing but an obscure swordsman until he’d reached S-rank. But soon after becoming a mercenary, he started to take on difficult quests that set him apart from the crowd, time and time again; it didn’t take long until he was recognized as one of the strongest swordsmen around. He fought with a narrow rapier, which he used to strike at his opponents’ weak points—and the impressive speed with which he did so had earned him the nickname of “the Spark.”

That was one story, at least. There were also rumors he’d earned that nickname thanks to the way he brought man after man into his bed in dazzling succession. They’d find themselves in his bed before they even realized it, and by the time the night was over, they’d be left with permanent mental scars. That was the *other* thing he was famous for.

It was a similar story for his other nickname: Seyfon, “the Slayer of a Hundred Men.” The assumption there was that he’d “slain” those men in a...nonlethal manner, but no one knew for sure how it had come about.

Everything about his background was veiled in mystery, and no one was willing to look into it too deeply.

And the reason for that was simple: they were too scared to.

“Leave it while you still have the chance, old guy! You don’t know who you’re up against!”

“I’d love to if I could, but... I *do* need that guild card...”

“You could find yourself ‘up against’ him in a *different* sense if things go badly here, you know?”

“Uh, Mister... Do you know how to make hemorrhoid cream? I mean, you might end up in his bed if you lose this, so...”

“*Please*, no. Damn it, you rotten duke, what have you gotten me into...?”

It seemed like Zelos was facing a greater threat than the one that had been

posed by a certain white ape a while ago.

Still, if he wanted to accept the guard request, he needed that guild card. At this point, he was fiercely regretting the fact that he hadn't just registered as a mercenary the normal way. It had been a grave error of judgment.

Though in his defense, no one would have expected to end up in a situation like this.

"Let's get started, then. There's a training area just out back; *come* with me, dear. I'll have you show me what you're made of once we're there."

"Is... Is it just me, or were you implying something with your wording there? Please tell me you don't have some kind of ulterior motive..."

"Oh... No! Of course not! You must just be imagining things. ≡"

"For someone without an ulterior motive, you sure took your time answering me just then..."

Seyfon guided Zelos and his companions to the training area out the back of the guild. But as they walked, Zelos felt a chill run down his spine that he just couldn't shake.

When they arrived, they found the training area to be largely empty. About the only people using it were a handful of newbie mercenaries who were being taught the ropes.

"What should we use for weapons? Practice swords? Just as long as you don't break them, that is."

"Aren't practice swords meant to be disposable? I thought you'd just be able to buy new ones if they broke."

"The mercenary guild *does* have a budget, you know? It can be hard to even get funding for disposable items like that."

"Penny-pinching, eh...? What, is there a depression going on or something? I feel like that'd be a pretty essential expense."

"We only make so much money; there's not too much we can do about it. If we had mercenaries as strong as you—mercenaries who could hold their own in the Far-Flung Green Depths—then maybe our little guild wouldn't have to

double as a tavern just to get by...”

Apparently the guild’s tavern business was a way of funding the rest of the guild’s operations.

With only unimpressive monsters around, it made sense that the guild’s earnings would be on the lower side. Monsters in these parts rarely even dropped magic stones, and the mercenaries themselves weren’t anything to write home about either.

“Well, it is what it is. I suppose I’ll use one of my own weapons, then.”

“Ooh... Show me a good time, okay? If you manage to beat me, I’ll give you a reward: I’ll let you play with me *all night long*... ≡”

“Uh... I think I’ll lose on purpose, then.”

“If you lose, then I expect you to let *me* play with *you*, all right, hun? Right until morning, no matter how tired, how *sweaty*, we get...”

“What am I even meant to do here?!”

Zelos was praying from the bottom of his heart that Seyfon was joking.

Unfortunately for him, though, it seemed like the man was being as serious as serious could be, on both counts.

“I don’t need anything except the guild card. Really. And even then, I’m only getting it for this one job.”

“Aww... Have I made you hate me? Oh, well—I think it’s about time. Show me what you’re made of, okay, Mr. Zelos?”

“Yes. Let’s get started. And remember, I *don’t need anything except the card*.”

“Ehee hee hee... Let’s see how a big strong mage like you does in a fight!”

The young mercenaries in training—and the guild employee working as their instructor—decided to spectate, excited by the rare opportunity to see their guild master in action. But as soon as the two men faced off against each other, the atmosphere in the training area suddenly changed.

They’d been fooling around just moments ago, but all of a sudden, a cold, oppressive chill could be felt sweeping over the area.

All of the spectators—Iris, Zelos's other companions, and the mercenaries in training—could hardly breathe. That was how stifling the air had become. It was like watching two ferocious beasts square off against each other.

Zelos had drawn a combat knife in each hand, while Seyfon had drawn his trusted rapier with his right hand and gotten into a stance. But that was all they'd done. After that, the two of them had frozen so still that it was like time itself had stopped.

"What's... What's happening?"

"It's so tense. And neither of them's moving..."

"It's not that they *aren't* moving... They *can't*. Didn't know the old geezer could be so intimidating..."

"Yeah—Mister's no pushover, you know? They don't call him one of the Destroyers for nothing!"

"That's one amazing nickname... Who even *is* he? Honestly, though, I just want this to be over already..."

It was their first time seeing a glimpse of a Destroyer's true strength.

He was just casually holding a knife in each hand and standing there, but they found themselves unable to tear their eyes away.

It was a mercenary's instinct, trained by fighting against strong opponents.

An instinct that made sure you never looked away from a foe who could kill you in a moment if you got careless.

"Ooh... I didn't think you'd be *this* good. The world's a big place, mmm? This is making me *hard*... ♪"

"Well, you certainly seem to be enjoying yourself. So...what, am I meant to attack first here?"

"I'd love to go in myself, but I'm not sure it'd go too well for me. I wonder how many years it's been since I was able to taste this sort of pressure?"

"How about this, then? I'll toss a coin, and as soon as it hits the ground, we *both* go on the offensive. Does that work for you?"

“Oh, that sounds *delightful*. ≡ I’m already getting the shivers...”

Zelos returned his knives to their sheaths for a moment, took out a copper coin, and flicked it into the air with his thumb.

The coin came falling down between the two men. To the onlookers, it seemed like it was descending in slow motion.

The instant the coin hit the ground, both men sprang into action.

The sheer speed with which they moved made the tense silence from moments ago seem like it had all been an illusion. Then came the sounds of metal against metal, blade against blade.

Seyfon’s rapier, the longer weapon, was made for stabbing. But before the spectators had noticed, he’d also drawn a weapon in his *left* hand. It was a dagger known as a main gauche, and he was parrying with it, adopting a fighting style that united offense and defense.

Zelos, meanwhile, was using his combat knives along with his gauntlets to make counterattacks and any other moves the situation called for.

He dashed forward, trying to get up close to Seyfon and gain the advantage. But Seyfon did an impressive job of intercepting Zelos with a counterattack that kept him away.

This was all they were doing for now: dancing back and forth, neither man able to land a decisive blow.

“Whoa... What’s up with that old guy?!”

“He’s fighting on par with the *guild master*! Jeez...”

The onlookers gawked, captivated by the spectacle. The sight of these two expert fighters going head-to-head was enough to leave them lost for words.

Then, all of a sudden, things changed.

Seyfon, who’d been fighting in close quarters, jumped back—right as the ground cracked where he’d just been standing. That was thanks to a combat skill Zelos had just used: Fierce Flying Kick.

Without any warning, Zelos had attacked the spot where Seyfon had been

standing, leaving the guild master with no choice but to dodge by leaping back. As soon as Seyfon landed, though, he surged forward again, closing the gap and sending a fierce thrust toward Zelos.

The spectators' eyes went wide for a moment.

But then, just before the attack would have hit, Seyfon stepped to the side, distancing himself again. Sweat formed on his brow, and his lips twisted into a smile.

"Now, that's just *scary*. I wasn't expecting you to try and destroy my weapon when I came at you like that..."

"The fact that you realized what I was trying to do makes you pretty impressive yourself. I was hoping to land it as a counter, but you saw through me right away... Is it some sort of intuition you've built up over the years?"

"It was a close call, honestly. You know, I'm curious—was that Fierce Flying Kick you targeted me with just meant to set up destroying my weapon?"

"Who knows? In the end, you saw it coming, so it doesn't really matter."

Right as Seyfon had begun his stab, Zelos had stuck out a gauntleted fist holding a knife. If Seyfon hadn't noticed, it probably would've shattered his rapier.

If he hadn't had his wits about him, it could've cost him dearly.

"I never thought it'd be possible to use Fang Breaker like that... You're kinda scaring me here, hun."

"Not that it did anything, in the end. You figured me out. Now, where to go from here..."

"I'm not sure how to say this, but... You don't really fight like a mage, do you?"

"Well, you see, I'm not what you'd call a *respectable* mage. I'm willing to use every dirty trick in the book."

"I'm starting to like you more and more! This is all making me hot... Now—my turn!"

Seyfon's figure blurred, and several copies of him formed out of thin air.

Each of those copies then attacked with thrust after thrust, but Zelos repelled them all with his combat knives.

As long as this continued, though, he was stuck on defense.

"Ph-Phantom Rush? But..."

"You're kidding me! The geezer seriously parried all that with a couple knives?!"

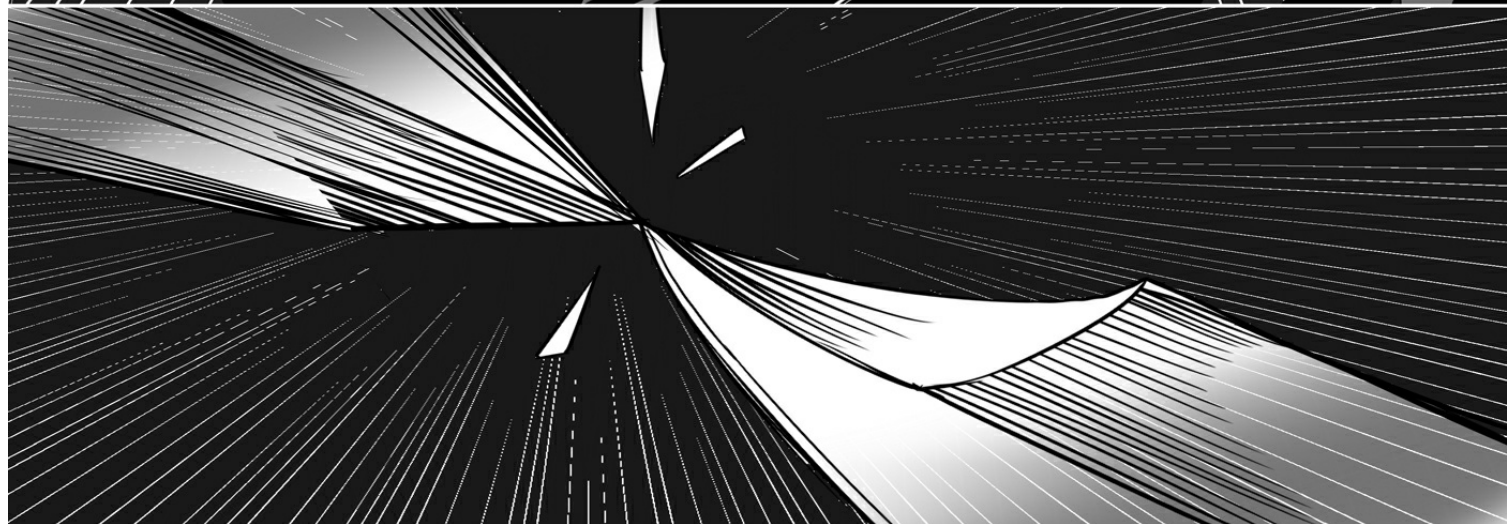
"Just Mister being Mister, I guess... Still, it doesn't look like he can really attack right now."

If Zelos didn't do a good enough job dodging the constant flurry of attacks, he'd get hit.

But he had another strategy to deal with this. A strategy for counterattack—one that left Seyfon shocked.

"Wha—?!"

Zelos used the very same skill to attack Seyfon's rapier, defending himself from each thrust by hitting its point with a knife.



It was Point Strike, a skill that combined hand-to-hand fighting with swordsmanship.

Zelos was one of the Destroyers, though. He wasn't done just yet.

A rapier was considered a one-handed weapon, and you could protect yourself by pairing it with a main gauche in your off hand. It made for a solid fencing technique. But you really only attacked with the rapier; the main gauche was practically just a shield.

This might have *looked* like a match between two dual-wielders, but that wasn't at all the case.

Even if Seyfon had wanted to attack with his main gauche, he was holding it with his off hand. It'd be a weak attack, easy to read.

Suddenly, Seyfon noticed a knife coming toward him. He ducked out of the way in a hurry and deflected the attack with his rapier's knuckle guard. But it was only *after* deflecting the attack that he noticed: Zelos had *thrown* the knife.

Zelos followed up by closing the gap with Maneuver and grabbing the deflected knife with his left hand. And then, straightaway, he went in for Seyfon's neck using the knife in his *right* hand. His throw had been a distraction. It had only lasted for a moment—but that moment was all he'd needed.

You wouldn't usually expect a knife to come flying toward you out of the blue, but that was exactly what had happened to Seyfon. And to top it off, he hadn't expected Zelos to be able to catch up to the knife in midair. By the time Seyfon realized what was really happening, the combat knife was already at his throat. The fight was over.

"What was that sword skill you used there—Hidden Twinfang Flash? You're seeming less like a mage with every moment. I can tell you're used to fighting like this, used to taking out your enemies when they least expect it. If anything, I'd say you're...less of a swordsman, more of an assassin?"

"Strictly speaking, I'm a mage, if anything, so..."

Back in *Swords & Sorceries*, Zelos had spent a lot of time going out solo to ambush gankers and one-shot them.

As a result, even his close-quarters fighting skills were on par with a proper assassin's. He definitely wasn't your typical mage.

"Well, I lose. I got too heated... You're definitely S-rank, I can say that much. Maybe something *above* S-rank."

"Mercenary ranks don't really mean much to me, to be honest. I'm a *mage*."

"Look who's talking... I'm an S-rank myself, you know? And you took me down without even breaking a sweat..."

"No, no, it was a tough fight, really! Especially with my years catching up to me like they are."

"I'm not so sure about that. You could have stepped it up a lot further, couldn't you? That's what it looked like to me, at least."

Zelos *had* been taking the fight seriously...but about halfway through, he'd realized he was having an easier time of it than he'd expected.

Seyfon, he could tell, had been fighting him seriously. But what really astonished Zelos was just how superior his own abilities were.

From Zelos's perspective, there wasn't that much difference between an S-rank and an ordinary person. He was above Level 1,800, and it wasn't just for show. Even then, though, he was bewildered by the sheer scale of his advantage. The gap between him and others was so large that he struggled to measure it.

He had so much power, he didn't know what to do with it.

"I guess I don't quite understand what I'm capable of, even myself. I *was* taking the fight seriously, I'm sure of it, but..."

"The world really *is* a big place, isn't it? You know, you're the fifth person I've come across who's stronger than I am. And you're head and shoulders above the other four."

"That's more people than I would've expected... I must not be great at estimating this kind of thing."

"Really, there are only so many people in this country who are stronger than I am! And *you* are the best of them all. You're just *fabulous*... ≡"

“Uh, would you mind not looking at me like that? I don’t like the *passion* in your eyes...”

“No can do, hun. It’s too late now. I’m already hard.”

SCHWIIIIING!

This time, Zelos was sure of it: right as Seyfon struck a disconcerting pose, a sound effect came bursting out of the middle of his crotch.

Zelos decided to run. Full pelt.

“Aww, you don’t have to be so shy! I like that about you, though... You’re only making me fall for you harder!”

“Uh... No, I think he’s just creeped out.”

“I guess Zelos will have to watch out for his backside. He’ll be gobbled up if he’s not careful!”

“I don’t think he’d want to hear that from *you*, Lena. Still, I’m not sure Mister’s ever going to come back here again...”

Just as Iris had thought he would, Zelos fled straight to the inn that Delthasis had prepared for him. He wasted no time getting away from the mercenary guild and its effeminate guild master.

Ultimately, Zelos got his guild card...but since he’d run away, Iris and the others were tasked with giving it to him, and they handed it over at the inn.

When he was given the card, a look of fear came over his face. His mind had been cast back to a certain nightmarish experience from a few months prior. He was left cursing the dangers that existed out in the world.

At any rate, he’d managed to register as a mercenary without incident...depending on your definition of “incident,” perhaps. He’d been promoted straight to S-rank, as you might expect.

For a little while thereafter, Zelos became famous as the mage who’d triumphed over an S-rank mercenary...but that was a story for another time.

*

While Zelos was fighting the S-rank guild master, the coccos had been on

standby near the guild's reception desk.

"Awww! ≡ Just look at how pretty their feathers are! And they're so *soft*!"

"I heard cocos are meant to be ferocious, but when...you look at them up close, they're kinda cute, aren't they?"

"Cute, yeah, but also... How do I put it? There's something about them that almost feels...chivalrous? I get the feeling they'd be stronger than the men around here! ≡"

Before long, they'd gotten popular with the guild's female employees. And now, they were surrounded.

"Bok..." ("This is...sort of embarrassing, isn't it?")

"Co-caw, bokah..." ("I must say, I am not good at dealing with this sort of thing...")

"Bo-keh, cococah." ("How sinful we are. To think we have enticed women beyond the bounds of our very species...") However brutal and ferocious they could be, the cocos just looked like plain old chickens when they were sitting there docile.

Plus, thanks to Zelos's care, their plumage had a healthy sheen to it. It was clear from a look that they were some high-class birds.

They were a world apart from the wild cocos raised by your average farmer.

"Why the fuck aren't you letting us take the job?! We got into an *accident*—we *told* you that already!"

"I know it must be unfortunate for you, but the rules say that—"

"Don't fuck with us! Who the hell do you think we are?"

Back at the reception desk, it seemed like a group of mercenaries who'd missed the deadline to accept the guard job were kicking up a stink.

They'd probably made their way here from outside Stihla. Furious, one of them grabbed a male receptionist—who was getting ready to go home—by the collar, hoping to threaten the guild into letting them accept the job. But...

FWOOSH!

When the cocos saw what was happening, a fire kindled in their eyes. The fire of ferocious birds of prey, ready to hunt their targets.

The rest happened in an instant. Grown adults were flung into the air before you could even blink, each of them battered by powerful blows and slashes. It was a proper one-hit kill—though, well, they weren't *quite* dead.

“Bokah.” (“What a waste of my blade.”)

“Kokeh? Cakokeh, cocokke?” (“Did you kill him, Zankei? More importantly, though... When did you learn hand-to-hand combat, Senkei? I’m sure the last time I saw you trying it, you were no good...”) “Bokakokka, ba-caw!” (“You can’t be a proper fighter with a bow alone. For that, and for my self-defense, I had Leader instruct me.”) “Koka, bobobo-cah.” (“I didn’t kill the man. Though I did tear his clothes to shreds...”)

One of the mercenaries had had his armor torn to tatters, leaving him naked. Another had already swollen so badly from the beating he’d received that you’d think he was obese.

The cocos had already been strong enough the first time Zelos had encountered them. And they’d improved by leaps and bounds since then.

The room was silent—apart from the trio of chattering chickens. The guild’s employees were all staring at them. And then...

“Awwwwwww!”

The room erupted in high-pitched squees.

“Aren’t they just the strongest little birdies!”

“They’re amazing, right?! They dealt with those thugs in an instant! They’re cute, they’re strong... Aren’t these just the best birds ever?!”

“If they were human, I wouldn’t mind spending the night with them... ≡”

The cocos were suddenly even more popular.

They spent their rest of the time at the guild—right up until Zelos ran out of the building full pelt—surrounded by the guild’s female employees.

A month later, there was a notable increase in the number of mercenaries

accompanied by wild coccos...but that was a story for another day.

The main takeaway was this: Ukei, Zankei, and Senkei had become legends.

The story of the Three Warrior Chickens would go down in history.

And their legend was only just getting started—a trivial legend though it might be.

Chapter 6: The Old Guy Meets Croesus

“What *is* this place?!”

Zelos had sprinted away from the mercenary guild as fast as his legs would carry him. Eventually, he’d arrived at the inn Delthasis had prepared for him...but it was so much *fancier* than he’d been expecting.

For starters, his room was awfully spacious for just one person. And it was filled with all sorts of decorations. Paintings on the walls; a soft rug spread out across the floor; colorful vases, each containing neatly arranged flowers; and a bed big enough to sleep two or three people with ease.

All this luxury made it clear that this was no ordinary inn. Zelos could do nothing but stare, dumbfounded. There was a beautifully soft sofa too, and the employees had been incredibly thorough in cleaning the room.

This went beyond just “great hospitality.” In fact, it went so far that Zelos was actually feeling a little overwhelmed.

“Uh... *Surely* this can’t just be a one-person room, right?”

The room he’d been given was something like a VIP room at a three-star hotel.

Its decorations were all very classy, but Zelos was used to living a modest life. He couldn’t relax in a place like this.

There wasn’t even a single crease in the bedsheets. This place clearly went to great lengths for the sake of its guests.

And as a result, it stuck out like crazy—though not in a bad way.

“C’mon, Mr. Delthasis. There’s no way a room like this suits me...”

Zelos just couldn’t get over being all by himself in such a big room.

If this was a second-rate inn, let alone a third-rate one, he’d be diving into the bed to unwind right about now. But he just couldn’t bring himself to leap onto such a luxurious bed with perfectly creaseless sheets.

Zelos *had* stayed in luxury hotels before, but at the end of the day, he was more used to the humble life. He just wasn't good at dealing with this kind of luxury. Essentially, he was the type to feel most at home in a snug little four-and-a-half-tatami room. Being given a room like this just left him feeling awkward about making people go to so much trouble for his sake.

And that was especially true after his long years living out in the countryside. He just couldn't relax in a place like this, either mentally or physically.

If this had been back around the time of the global financial crisis, he probably would've been able to get used to it. But at this point in his life, Zelos had grown too far detached from the luxury of high society. Being thrust into a room like this left him feeling nothing but bewilderment.

"Why does it even *need* to be this large? I mean, I guess it's convenient if I want to adjust some things on my motorbike, but I'd have to move this expensive-looking rug first, and then the floor might— Wait, seriously? The floor's *marble-tiled*?!"

Zelos wasn't sure why, but Delthasis seemed to have prepared him a room that was very unbecoming someone of his humble means. It had been about a decade since he'd slept in a place like this; he just couldn't get used to it anymore. Honestly, he would've preferred to stay in your average budget inn...

Between this, and the hassle with the guild master at the mercenaries' guild earlier, Zelos's mood was growing sour.

KNOCK! KNOCK!

Just as Zelos was starting to fall into a slump, he heard a knock coming from the other side of the door. He tilted his head, confused. He'd run here as fast as he could, after all; Iris and the others would have to still be at the mercenaries' guild. Zelos had far higher stats than theirs, and he could run so much faster. Even if they *had* left at the same time as him, there was no way they could've made it here this quickly.

Still, Zelos figured, there was no point in overthinking it. He decided to just open the door.

Even if this visitor was a burglar, Zelos was strong enough to dispatch them

with ease. He didn't really need to worry about it.

"Hello? Who might this b— Oh?"

As he opened the door, Zelos was met with a familiar face.

Standing there was a maid with bluish-black hair and glasses. It was Celestina's attendant, Miska.

"It has been a while, Sir Zelos."

"Oh, Miska! Long time no see, yeah. I thought we'd be meeting up a little later than this, but I guess you're faster than I was expecting."

"I was aware you were going to be arriving in Stihla today, Sir Zelos, so I simply made an estimate of your arrival time and called upon the inn. There is nothing to be so surprised about."

"I *am* surprised, though. I only got to the inn just now... Wait, don't tell me you've got spies dotted around the place or something?"

"Why, that is a trade secret. It is not something I could disclose so casually, even to you, Sir Zelos."

From what Miska had just said, there were obviously a considerable number of spies within this college town.

This was the formidable Duke Delthasis they were talking about, after all. It was only natural that he'd be taking measures to protect his children—but still, there weren't many people out there who could get things done this quickly.

Just *imagining* how many people the duke might have at his beck and call sent a shiver down Zelos's spine.

"Unfortunately, both Sir Zweit and milady are unable to greet you today. Both are preoccupied with...not their studies, per se, but prior arrangements. However, Sir Croesus agreed to come in their stead."

"Croesus, Croesus... Oh! Zweit's younger brother, right? That was one impressive report he sent me a while back. It seemed like he did a real deep dive into researching that magic conduit ring... Well, then, where is he?"

Zelos peered behind Miska, but Croesus was nowhere to be seen. All he could

see was what looked like...some sort of mysterious lump, tied up with rope, lying in the hallway. And on closer inspection, that “mysterious lump” was wriggling about like a worm.



“Uh... Surely I’m wrong here, but... Don’t tell me that thing bundled up in rope is...”

“Sir Croesus, yes. If I’d taken my eyes off him, he would inevitably have been distracted by all manner of shady peddlers, so I was left with no choice. Please understand: I have only tied him up and dragged him along like this *because I had no other choice.*”

There was a threatening gleam in Miska’s glasses.

She’d really emphasized that last part of her sentence, but by the looks of it, she’d enjoyed tying Croesus up. The corners of her lips were curled slightly upward.

She’s definitely having fun with this, Zelos thought...though he made sure not to say it. Not after seeing her *step on* the Croesus-worm like she was just now.

The woman clearly had no mercy, even for the son of her employer. Zelos was scared.

“Are you...sure you haven’t gone a little too far there, though?”

“Sir Croesus failed to emerge from his room however long I waited, so I simply forced my way in—only to find him holding a map that seemed to chart the locations of every shady merchant in the city, nearly ready to depart. Just earlier, he had expressed his desire to meet with you, Sir Zelos, and yet it appeared he had forgotten that goal before even leaving his room, all to prioritize his own hobbies. The sight of it sent my body into action before I could think... I do not regret it, though. If anything, I rather enjoyed it.”

“Uh... Can you really just do that, though? He *is* the second son of a duke, right? You’re really trampling all over him there...”

“I am confident a lovely maid like myself will be forgiven for such a trifling matter! Besides, the fault lies with Sir Croesus for allowing himself to become distracted from his plans.”

It was almost refreshing how bold she was being about all this.

She wasn’t holding back in treating the son of a duke however she wished, and she wasn’t showing any mercy either.

“W-Well... I don’t want to just leave you standing at the entrance, so please, come on in.”

“Thank you. Excuse me, then.”

Miska bowed slightly, still calm, before heading into the room, dragging Croesus behind her by the rope.

Don’t tell me she actually dragged him the whole way here like that...?!

Miska adjusted her glasses with a finger before speaking in a whisper, as if she were able to read Zelos’s mind:

“Please, worry not. I brought him most of the way here by carriage. Dragging him *behind* the carriage, mind you...”

“W-Wouldn’t he *die* from that?! That sounds dangerous! Seriously!”

“It was perfectly safe. Considering the distance we needed to travel, I made sure to bind him with several layers of rope, tied thickly enough to protect him and ensure he would not die as he was dragged along. It was an ingenious idea, if I may say so myself, for giving Sir Croesus a thrill he would never forget.”

“That doesn’t reassure me at all! What kind of ‘safety’ is that?!”

“I believe that a life beholden to peaceful routine is no life at all. A proper life requires some thrills from time to time.”

“No! No it *doesn’t*! Not thrills like *that*, at least!”

Zelos hadn’t met with Miska for a while, but it seemed like her personality had changed in a scary way since he’d last seen her. It sent a shiver down his spine. Or, no; perhaps this was how she’d really been all along...

“Now, I must admit: *part* of what I have been telling you is merely a joke.”

“The other half was true, then?! Tell me: what actually happened, and what didn’t?!”

“The part about dragging him behind a carriage was a lie. It was only a horse, to be precise.”

“So the part about dragging him behind was true?! Were you trying to torture him or something?!”

She truly was a terrifying maid.

She'd built up a good reputation for her conscientious work at Creston's mansion, but she was quite the extreme individual. If you let her stone-faced appearance fool you, you'd be in for a bad time.

"That said... He's alive, so all's well that ends well, I suppose. Could you untie the ropes? I'd like to have him help me with something."

"Untie him, you say? Mmm... What a bother. Can we not simply leave him tied up?"

"Of *course* we can't! And as I was saying, I've got some work to do that's a bit of a pain, so I'd like to get his help. Specifically, I want to change out some of the equipment on my...rapid-transport magic tool, but I'm kind of short on hands."

"A *magic tool*?!"

"Whoa!"

Croesus had suddenly leaped up from the ground.

He tended to get hysterical when it came to magic. Even Zelos was shocked by the way the young man had reacted.

"Where is it? Where's the magic tool? What kind is it? What does it do? What kind of abilities does it have? Is it something you equip? Or is it more of a weapon focused on physical attacks? How long does it stay active for? What's its range? Don't leave anything out—I want to hear it all!"

"This... This *is* your first time meeting me, right? Are you really going to skip straight to asking about a magic tool before you even introduce yourself?"

"That is simply how Sir Croesus is. Whenever magic or magic tools come into the picture, all other thoughts leave his head. And yet he is the second son of a ducal house. I imagine you understand our hardships, yes?"

"So he's the type to obsess over his hobbies at the expense of all else, eh? Seems like the whole family's full of strong personalities..."

The former head of the family was an old man who doted excessively on his granddaughter, while the current family head, the duke, was a complete

enigma; you could never tell quite what he was up to behind the scenes. The family's oldest son was a hothead, the second son was magic-obsessed, and the daughter, Celestina... Well, she seemed to be the most decent one of the lot.

"My apologies. My name is Croesus von Solistia. I've been hearing about the Great Sage Zelos from my brother and sister for some time now. I've also been thinking that I'd like to speak with you, but unfortunately—*very* unfortunately—I'd never had the opportunity until today. Now that I *do* have the opportunity, I'd like to ask you to take me under your tutelage, Mr. Zelos. That's why I've come here today."

"Been *dragged* here, looks like... Not hurt, by the way, are you? I heard you got dragged along behind a horse."

"Yes. I did feel as if my life were on the line, that much is for sure. Miska has been *merciless* lately. It's been *quite* the bother... I swear, what would she have done if I'd died?"

Croesus's glare bounced off Miska like water off a duck's back.

Thinking about it for a second, it was absolutely the sort of thing Croesus could've died from. And yet he seemed to be accepting it as if it were just an everyday inconvenience. It was a peek into just how odd the Solistia ducal house could be.

"Anyway, could I ask you to get me out of these ropes now? I'm not sure I'll be able to get back up if I fall over again..."

"Sure—just give me a moment. Knife, knife... Where's a good knife? No, not this... That one's super poisonous... Uh..."

Zelos was rummaging through his inventory, trying to find a knife to cut the ropes with, but everything he was pulling out had some kind of crazy effect. All of these knives were liable to activate some kind of crazy magic just by cutting a rope.

He had his combat knives, but the blades on those were too thick, so he wasn't able to slide one of them between the ropes.

The only other knives he had here were weapons that he'd modified in dangerous ways for fun. They weren't suited to simple tasks like this. Not only

were they packed with powerful magic, but they were also all failures he'd never managed to sell.

"Hmm... Should I just try cutting away at it millimeter by millimeter? You'll get injured if I mess up, but I *am* able to use healing magic. Would you like me to give it a try? Even if I cut off a finger, I'd be able to reattach it, but..."

"Please just...cut the rope normally. From what I've heard about you, I feel like you could kill me like that, even if you're being careful."

"Yes, and I suppose no amount of healing would help if you just died straightaway... Hmm. This is a pickle..."

There was virtually no gap between the ropes binding Croesus; it was the work of a skilled expert. It seemed like it'd be difficult to cut them properly, even with a narrow-bladed knife. And on closer inspection, the ropes had steel wire in the middle of them.

"You have so many knives, Sir Zelos. Are you really saying that none of them are usable?"

"They aren't, no. Even the better ones of the lot would activate some kind of medium-area attack magic. The problem is, all the ones here are ones I made half as a joke, or just to mess with someone. All the *useful* ones got sold off..."

"I suppose I am left with no choice. I will allow you to borrow my own trusty knife. Do make sure to return it later, though, okay?"

"You *had* one? This whole time?! Why didn't you just cut the rope yourself, then?"

"Are you telling the creator of this artistic masterpiece to destroy it with her own hands? What a cruel man you are, Sir Zelos..."

Miska seemed to have some kind of pride in how she'd tied up Croesus.

Sighing, Zelos took the knife from her and started to carefully cut through the rope just next to a knot.

"One day, I should tie up milady in tortoiseshell bonda— Ahem! You heard nothing."

“I... I think I *did* hear something just now. Something kind of crazy... Anyway, this is one flashy-looking knife you’ve got here. What’s it meant to be used for? In fact, why are you carrying around a knife in the first place?”

“Every lady has her secrets.”

The knife Zelos had borrowed from Miska looked incredibly showy, for lack of a better term.

Its shape was very irregular. In fact, you could just barely tell it was even meant to be a knife. And it had an extremely sinister aura to it, like it had been used in a tribal ritual or something.

It had clearly absorbed blood—blood that had rusted the blade. It was decorated with creepy symbols like skulls and snakes, and the whole thing clearly had a dark vibe to it. You *had* to assume it was cursed.

Zelos was insanely curious about what it was meant to be used for.

“Um... Sorry to interrupt, but would you mind cutting the rope sooner rather than later, please? This position is really quite uncomfortable...”

“Where’d you even *get* this thing? It looks like something you’d use to deal the final blow when you’re making a sacrifice to the devil...”

Zelos had so many questions he wanted answers to. But regardless, he grabbed on to the sinister knife.

Eventually, Croesus was freed—though it took about fifteen minutes to get there.

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Zelos was working with Croesus, who was finally free, to change the equipment on his motorbike.

The room had plenty of space, and it was made of stone, so Zelos had no problem taking the bike out of his inventory.

If the room had been made of *wood*, doing this probably would’ve created a hole in the floor.

“You see the rear wheel frame—that bit there? Keep it steady for me. I’m

about to attach the arm for the sidecar, so I want you to hold the opposite side to make sure it doesn't move."

"This might be a very simple question, but...what's this thing that's attached here at the moment? Part of it's sticking out, and it's sort of in the way..."

"Oh, that holds a weapon I made at some point for fun. It can only hit things straight ahead of it, but it should at least help to hold back any enemies." Then, in a quieter voice: "Its firepower might be a little over the top, though..."

"Did you just...say something? Something kind of worrying? About firepower?"

"No, of course not. Must have been your imagination... Argh, it's hard to get this bolt in place. Did I screw up the design?"

While the motorbike looked American in design, Zelos was able to attach a sidecar without it looking all that out of place. The sidecar didn't really have space for people to ride in it, but instead it had something like a long, narrow container jutting out.

It was making it a real pain to try and attach the arm for the sidecar to the chassis.

"So you're saying there's a weapon in here? From the looks of it, I'd have to assume it's a *magic* weapon of some sort..."

"I'd rather not go into detail on that. Not here, at least. We've got no clue whether anyone might be listening in on us—word could get out about this thing, and I don't want people pestering me to mass-produce it. If you want one, make it yourself. At the very least, I won't be building more of them, okay? It's not exactly the sort of thing I want to make public..."

"So it *is* a dangerous weapon, then. I must say, I'm curious as to what exactly it is... I'd quite like to pull it apart and take a look, actually. Would that be okay? I can feel my instincts as a researcher tingling."

"No, sorry. It'd be a real pain to put back together if we took it apart, you see. And it's far from perfect; I'd be embarrassed to show it off to other people. I'd appreciate it if you didn't pry too far into it."

“You call this ‘far from perfect’? It looks like a magnificent device.”

To Zelos, this was just a toy he’d made as a hobby. But to Croesus, it was an unknown piece of technology.

His curiosity was piqued, and he was wearing an expression of wonder that you’d usually expect to find on a boy far younger.

“It’s just something I half-assed with transmutation; I cut corners on just about everything apart from the looks and the outside. I made the internals too powerful, so it’s not reliable at all.”

“W-Wait a minute! Did you just say ‘transmutation’?! Y-You can transmute?! But that’s the pinnacle of magic! It’s what every mage aspires to!”

“Hm? It’s not that hard to learn transmutation, you know? You just need to have high enough levels in the Blacksmith and Alchemist job skills, as well as in metal engraving and some other crafting skills. If anything, I feel like the hard part comes *after* you learn the skill. You have to make flop after flop, lemon after lemon; there’s no knowing *how* many minerals and things you’ll need to waste before you’re finally able to make something with the properties you’re after...”

“But...isn’t transmutation one of the very last things there is to master as a mage? That’s what I’ve heard, at least...”

“Well, it’s not exactly easy, but it’s definitely something you can learn. You just need to be prepared to throw away a lot of resources along the way. Personally, I picked up mining, gathering, and apothecary skills too to help me collect materials, and eventually they combined together to become a job skill. I recently got some job skill called Ascended One too, but honestly, I’ve got no clue how it works.”

For a while now, Zelos had been obtaining skills en masse and developing them into job skills—and at this point, even the slightest little thing could lead to his obtaining some new job skill or another. Ever since he’d realized that, he’d given up looking at his own status screen. Even if he didn’t, all the things he could do, and the skills he could use, just came floating into his head of their own volition.

Looking over each and every one of them felt like a pain, and he didn't use most of them that often to begin with, so he figured he didn't need to bother. This was one of the drawbacks of being a jack-of-all-trades.

"What's 'Ascended One' meant to mean, anyway? Are you some sort of god? Does it mean you holed yourself away and reached some kind of enlightenment? It *does* seem confusing; I can see why you wouldn't quite understand it. Is it meant to be some kind of...mage from the East, perhaps?"

"I don't really know *what* logic this world runs on, so I can't say. If I had to guess, I'd assume I earned it by improving a bunch of other fighting-related and magic-related job skills. But I'm not sure I even *need* it at this point... I don't know what it is, I don't know what it does, and I don't like the picture it conjures up of me being some old hermit out in the mountains."

Zelos and Croesus continued to chat as they connected the cable for the side car.

Miska, for her part, was just relaxing on the sofa, sipping elegantly at a cup of tea.

As Zelos and Croesus worked away, the Harley-Sanders Model 13 was given more and more armor, and little tweaks here and there, until it had eventually transformed into something that looked more like a military-use motorbike.

Once the pair were done, they sat at a table and engrossed themselves in a chat about magic.

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"This is a spell that I deciphered by myself before rebuilding it. What do you think?"

"It's nothing to write home about, but it looks pretty stable, at least. If this is something you've managed to do all by yourself, I'd say it's a passing grade. I can tell you've been really thorough with the magic formula, and the shape of the sigil's not too bad either. I'd give you...eighty-five points, I guess?"

"Eighty-five points, is it? What am I missing, then? How would I get those remaining fifteen points?"

“Well, the first thing I’d point to is probably that the sigil’s too large. You want to make it as small as you can—the better job you do of that, the more room you’ll have left to learn other spells. Apart from that...the magic characters themselves are fine, but there are seven lines in there that are just in the way. If not for those, I probably would’ve been happy to call you a first-rate mage. Oh, and the formula’s kind of lacking in a few parts. Still, this was your first time making a sigil. I’ll spare you all the little nitpicks.”

Croesus had modified an existing spell entirely by himself, and he was showing Zelos the result.

The overall structure of the magic formula was a little rough around the edges, but the spell would be reliable and consistent, if nothing else. Zelos figured Croesus was blessed with the talents of a crafter.

The young man would probably be able to make a decent fortune for himself if he got into selling spell scrolls.

And he seemed to be thrilled to have received a passing grade from a Great Sage.

“I’d like to make magic tools too, if possible. I know you do it by etching formulas into magic stones, but I’ve never actually tried making one before. I’m curious to know, Mr. Zelos; is there a trick to it?”

“If you’re going to be etching formulas into magic stones, you probably want to have the Magic Control skill. If you can’t maintain the magic formula properly while you’re etching it, it’ll end up distorted in the magic stone. That can make the tool do some weird things. And sometimes, it can mean the mana leaks out, which stops the tool from having much of an effect at all.”

“Oh, I see... So *that’s* why my brother and sister have been training their Mana Control, is it? If they can turn it into the more advanced version of the skill, they’d be able to use it for all sorts of different things...”

“Well, it’s up to the two of them to decide what kind of mages they want to be. I won’t be telling them what to do.”

As a researcher at heart, Croesus never really hesitated to ask anything he was curious about.

Zelos was struggling to give perfect answers to all of his questions, but he was still enjoying this little discussion quite a lot. It was almost like he was back chatting with his in-game friends.

“By the way, about that bundle of magic formulas you’ve got there... How’d you get them here? You were tied up the whole way here, weren’t you?”

“Miska was carrying them, wasn’t she? I took them from her just earlier...”

“No, she wasn’t. I swear she didn’t have anything in her hands when I opened the door for her...”

The two of them looked over at Miska.

She returned their gaze with a nonchalant glance, and responded as she adjusted her glasses with a finger.

“Sir Zelos, Sir Croesus... A maid’s skirt is full of secrets.”

“Wait... In your *skirt*? This was a pretty big bundle of scrolls, you know?!”

“How did she even— It’s about as thick as a dictionary, right? Surely that would’ve gotten in the way when she was walking... Yeah, I’ve got no idea.”

“It is for the best that you remain unaware of a maid’s secrets. If you were to learn the truth, there would be no going back.”

Zelos and Croesus were thinking the exact same thing: *What kind of maid is she?! And what does she mean, “no going back”?! Is she implying something bad would happen to me?!*

Maids were simply meant to be housekeepers, hired to look after their employers. But the maids that *Miska* talked about seemed to have unfathomable depths. Part of Zelos and Croesus wanted to ask her more about it...but when they thought about actually doing it, they got the shivers.

They could feel something sinister underneath her job title of “maid.”

Miska let out a soft laugh as light reflected off her glasses. Frankly, she looked scary.

“Anyway... Let’s get down to business. I’d like to give you these.”

Zelos pulled out a set of rings and amulets.

Neither the rings nor the amulets seemed particularly fancy at a glance, but on closer inspection, the rings had complex geometric patterns carved into them, and each was inlaid with a little magic stone—so small that they almost seemed to just be symbolic.

The amulets were just as simple. Each was just a plate fitted with a magic stone, a cord attached to the plate to make it an amulet. But Croesus could tell that they were packed with an unbelievable amount of mana.

He couldn't help but gulp as he took the trinkets into his hands.

"A-Are these...magic tools? What sort of effect do they have? Do you mind if I ask?"

"The amulet automatically deploys a barrier to protect you from attacks, and the ring works together with a mask I have to tell me where you are. If you're in danger, it can release a special wave of mana to alert me. Consider it a trump card for emergencies."

"And there are three of each, right? Does that mean you're giving one to each of us?"

"Yes. Zweit's probably the likeliest target this time around, but there's a chance that you and Celestina could come under attack as well, so I prepared some for the two of you just in case."

The Solistia ducal house was a massive thorn in the side of the bloodline supremacists, who just about had the Wiesler faction under their thumb.

And that meant that as potential heirs to the house, Zweit, Croesus, and Celestina could all be threats.

With that in mind, Zelos had prepared all these just in case, figuring there was a chance that some fools could get the idea of using the combat training camp to make the siblings' deaths look like "accidents."

"Well, if they attacked all three of you at once, they'd practically be admitting they did it. They *do* sound like they're idiots, though, so it's not impossible. It doesn't hurt to be prepared, at least."

"These are...spectacular! Please, allow me to research them!"

“Now...Croesus. *Surely* you wouldn’t be thinking of just keeping all these for yourself to research without handing them over to your siblings, hmm? I want to make it clear: you only need *one of each*.”

Croesus flinched. “Wh-Why would you say that?”

“Because if *I* were you, the first thing I’d do is hide them all away in a pocket and pretend I’d never seen them. Your personality’s similar to mine, you see, so I can kind of tell what you’re going to do...”

Silence.

Zelos made a very persuasive point.

People had been telling Croesus for a while now that his personality was similar to Zelos’s, but he hadn’t expected to hear the same thing from Zelos himself.

And sure enough, Zelos’s guess had been right on the mark. It was almost impressive how little ability Croesus had to resist the allure of interesting magic tools when they were right in front of him. He *would* have taken them all back to his dorm room and kept them there, never handing them over to his siblings; he was confident of it.

Croesus felt cold sweat trickle down his back.

“Miska, could I ask *you* to hand these over to the other two, please?”

“Of course, Sir Zelos. I will make sure to do so myself.”

“Thanks. They’ll be essential if I’m going to guard them all, so I want to make sure the other two get them.”

“Don’t you trust me, Mr. Zelos? Sure, I’m interested in magic tools, but...”

“I don’t trust *myself*, that’s the thing. Especially since I’m pretty sure I’d prioritize my own hobbies if I were in your shoes. We’re birds of a feather, the two of us, so I can kind of just tell what you’d be thinking.”

Zelos and Croesus were natural enemies.

Not only could Zelos read what Croesus was going to do, but the overlap between their personalities also meant that Croesus had a decent idea of

whatever Zelos was thinking.

They got along well, but both were aware that they never wanted to get on each other's bad side.

"I suppose just these two will be enough for me, then. I'd *most* like to test out how they perform."

"So you *did* mean to take them all for yourself... The two of us really are alike, aren't we? I'll have to keep an eye on you..."

"I think you will be quite all right, Sir Zelos. Sir Croesus is a shut-in through and through; he is constantly striving to improve himself, yes, but his efforts are entirely limited to what can be done indoors. He is hardly the sort to go out and level up by fighting monsters. He is incredibly slothful."

"So that's *one* difference between us, eh...? I'm happy to hear that, at least."

Zelos didn't want to have to deal with a clone of himself. He'd already fought against someone who had a fighting style much like his own, and he'd found them to be a very annoying opponent. The memory was still fresh in his mind.

So at least they weren't totally identical—Zelos was relieved to hear they still had their differences, however few.

With the magic tools handed over, Zelos and Croesus's first meeting was over.

Later that day, the tools for Zweit and Celestina were handed over. Everyone was ready for the trip.

Chapter 7: The Old Guy Gets a Shock

Deep underneath a certain city lay another, long forgotten. It had been on the surface itself, once; now, it was buried far below, serving as a base for a criminal organization known as Hydra.

The underground was dark, lit only by the occasional magic tool. But within that darkness sat a ruined mansion—and in a room of that mansion were a handful of figures.

One of them was a woman wearing a black evening dress.

She had dark hair, and she was covered with all sorts of jewelry, looking very much like the daughter of some nouveau riche merchant.

While she had a hood pulled over her head, she looked completely out of her habitat in a place like this.

There was a sword at her waist, though, and every piece of jewelry she wore was a magic tool.

“Hey, Darling? Who are these two?”

“Some backup I prepared to be safe. We can’t have anything happening to you, Sharanla.”

A thin smile came to the face of a man wearing a gaudy suit.

The man and the woman were joined in the room by two others—both minors, by the looks of them.

One was a boy wearing armor. The collar on his neck, though, made it clear: he was a slave.

The other was a girl with her hair tied up in pigtails. She wore an outfit like a ninja’s...but it was a very conspicuous one, for a ninja. It was a bright peach color, for one. It was just about the last thing you’d want to wear for sneaking anywhere.

“Hey, Garlance. You promise you’re gonna set me free from being a slave

once this job's done, yeah?"

"Yes—as long as you do a good enough job. Prove you're useful and I'll set you free."

"Fine. I've got things I wanna do, y'know? I can't sit around wasting my time as a slave."

"Aww—the boy's got some big goals, does he? It's always nice to see that kind of motivation in someone so young."

"Don't call me 'boy'! I'm not some kid!"

"This guy put his hands on a lawful slave, Sharanla. He got busted, and they enslaved *him* as punishment. So I bought him."

Lawful slaves here had protections under the law. They wore slave collars, but they didn't have to just accept whatever happened to them.

They were something akin to a servant bought with money. If a person tried to lay their hands on a slave they'd bought, the slave would be able to lodge a claim against their owner.

Criminal slaves, on the other hand, wore a thrall's collar, and if they fled outside of a certain area, it would cause a sharp pain to course through their body.

Thrall collars were linked to a separate magic tool used for managing slaves, inflicting pain on attempted escapees by way of mental magic.

The specific effect depended on the crime in question, though. It was widely known that the worst criminals would be hit by attack magic instead.

"What an idiot! You should've *thought* about things a little before you bought a slave. Or did you really just assume you'd be able to buy one and get away with doing whatever you wanted to them?"

"Ngh... This is a fantasy world, so I thought I'd be able to make myself a harem of slaves..."

"Face reality. Life's never going to be that convenient for you. This is why you're just a naive little boy." Then she murmured, "So this boy's the same as I am, hmm? Maybe I could use him for something... He seems like a moron,

though.”

“Says his name’s ‘Reinhardt XIII.’ Real fancy name for an idiot, eh? He’s strong, though. I hear he went on a rampage and took out fifty mercenaries. Thought he could be useful, so I bought him.”

“And the girl?”

Sharanla glanced over at the girl in the peach-colored ninja outfit. Expressionless, the girl lifted something that looked like a pirozhki to her mouth before happily munching away on it.

She seemed to be no older than elementary school or middle school age.

“Dunno her name. Gave her some food when I saw her collapsed by the side of the road, and she started following me for some reason. She’s got some skills, though, that’s for sure.”

“You saved a child? That’s not like you, Darling...”

“Ninjas are destined to live in the shadows. And to die in the shadows. Pretend I’m not here.”

“A ninja? What about you is a ninja? How are you meant to sneak around like *that*? You’d stand out more than anyone. Now, Darling—going after little girls is a crime. You know that, right? You may be part of the underworld, but even so, you shouldn’t be—”

“Like hell I am! I thought for a bit I might sell her, but she’s been a big find, seriously. Yeah, she looks weird, but she’s part of the same world as ours, I’m tellin’ you. I had a business rival send some people after me, and she took out every last one of ’em.”

Sharanla was still giving Garlance a suspicious look, but she relented, sighing.

“Anyway, you’re giving me *backup*... You’re really being careful this time, aren’t you? What, you don’t trust me to get the job done by myself?”

“We’re dealing with the Duke of Solistia. *That’s* the problem. No telling what he’s gonna do. So they’re here to protect you, just in case.”

“I suppose that’s fine, then...”

Personally, Sharanla thought, she didn't need any protecting.

From her perspective, the vast majority of people out there were weak, and she was confident she could take them out with a single hit.

She figured she could assassinate anyone she wanted with ease—even a duke.

“Just as long as they don't get in my way. Especially this one—she's not enthralled, is she? Isn't it possible she could try to betray me?”

“You don't have to worry about that. She's awkward enough that she can't even earn herself a livin'. If she could, she wouldn't have been keeled over in the street like that.”

“Hm... I suppose. Well, whatever. I'll get to work, then.”

“Right. I'll show you a great time when you get back—look forward to it, hun.”

“Aha ha ha... I'll make sure to finish up nice and quickly, then. No cheating on me while I'm out, okay?”

“As if I'd have time for that! I've gotta talk stuff over for another deal now. No time for playin' around.”

Garlance took Sharanla into his arms, and the two of them exchanged a passionate kiss.

There was a loud wet sound as the two exchanged saliva, tongue coiled around tongue.

“Fuck... Wish I could do that...”

“Aha ha ha... You're too young for that, boy. Well, then, I'm off, Darling.”

“Yeah. Looking forward to hearing things went well.”

“Of course. I'll get it all cleaned up in no time~! ♪”

Sharanla and her backup left the dimly lit room, heading out into the darkness.

“Gah ha ha... I'll be paying you back with interest, Duke. For everything you've done to me, all these years...”

Left alone in the room, Garlance wore a sinister smile tinged with excitement.

He never would've expected that a job request from some kids playing around would give him the chance to get revenge on his sworn enemy. But he was more than happy to seize the opportunity.

If the job failed, he'd have no future ahead of him. He wouldn't be able to operate in the underworld anymore. Not in this country, at least.

But he was confident that wouldn't happen. He couldn't even imagine this little revenge plot failing.

All of the pieces were on the move, now. The stage was set for things to unfold in the Ramaf Woods.

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The Morning Star was a luxury inn in Stihla.

Zelos was in his room at the inn, meeting back up with Iris, Jeanne, and Lena, who'd arrived shortly after Croesus had left.

Iris had just finished handing Zelos his guild card. But when they told him the story of what had happened after he'd left, his face paled.

He didn't want to believe his ears.

"Y-You're kidding! That *can't* be right... You're saying that effeminate guild master guy...? No."

Zelos was shaking, a look of shock clear on his face.

"You may not be able to believe it, Mister, but it's the truth, okay?"

"I get how you feel. You gotta accept reality, though..."

"There are a lot of things out there in the world that people can't believe, Zelos. You know that, don't you? But I think this is one of those times when you just have to face the truth."

Zelos couldn't even hear them at this point, though.

What he'd heard was so absurd, so unfair, that he couldn't stop himself from shaking. Even if he'd wanted to accept what he was hearing, his sense of reason was trying its best to deny it. Or, no; it wasn't just *trying*. It *was* denying it.

“I refuse to believe it! *That* guy? *Him*? Seyfon? The one who said, ‘I’m going after your ass ≡’?!”

“To be fair, he didn’t actually *say* that... I suppose he did say things along those lines, though, didn’t he?”

“I mean, I can’t blame the geezer for seeing things that way...”

“There’s the way he looks too, yeah... I get how you feel, Mister.”

“No way... There’s just no way. He’s *not* gay?! He’s *straight*?! And he’s *married*?! In a harem, with fifty-three wives?! What the *hell*?!”

Zelos was screaming out from the bottom of his heart.

After Iris and the others had obtained Zelos’s guild card at the mercenaries’ guild, a nearby guild employee had informed them of the truth. They were just telling him what they’d heard.

But Zelos, who was still a bachelor himself, was struggling to accept the truth.

“S-So the way he moved, and the way he talked, and his mannerisms, were all...”

“Yeah. Apparently he’s got a hobby of teasing new mercenaries. Guess he was playing with you, huh, Mister?”

“The dude *looks* effeminate, but apparently that’s just ‘cause he’s obsessed with beauty stuff. I still don’t get it, though...”

“I don’t think *anyone* really gets it, honestly. We thought he was that kind of person too, so I don’t think it’s strange for Zelos to have assumed the same.”

Seyfon the Spark, the S-rank mercenary and guild master of the Stihla mercenaries’ guild, was actually a straight, married man.

There were *rumors* about him being gay, but he was just into tomboys—every one of his wives was a powerful, masculine woman with a lot of energy. And there were a whole fifty-three of them; that was the most impressive part of it all.

Essentially, he was a “feminist” in the same vein as Delthasis. Though they were different in that one had mistresses, and the other wives.

Seyfon was in relationships with women who tended to get mistaken for men, and so rumors had sprung up that he was gay; that was all it was. He was straight as an arrow, at heart, and apparently a devoted husband to boot.

He even had thirty-eight kids, by the sound of it. The guy had a big family.

“This can’t be right! How does a guy like that get *one* woman to marry him? Let alone a whole harem?! He’s got that mean-spirited hobby of his too; seriously, how’d he manage to get married? *I* haven’t managed to find anyone yet, but apparently *he* has...”

“That’s really got you down, huh, Mister?”

“I hate to agree with you here, but...I get why you don’t want to accept it. No matter how you look at the man, he did *not* seem straight...”

“He is, though. Well, it’s got nothing to do with me, so whatever.”

It seemed like Jeanne didn’t care. Lena, though, was starting to get a nasty grin on her face. She looked over at Jeanne with a weird expression.

“Wh-What? What’s up? If you got something you wanna say, spit it out. You’re grossin’ me out here...”

“Mmm... Eheh heh heh. Seyfon likes masculine women, right? So wouldn’t you be exactly his type?”

“Wh-Wha—?!”

“Oh! You’re right. You were just saying it’s got nothing to do with you, Jeanne, but you’d be exactly the kind of woman he goes after, wouldn’t you?”

Lena was right. If you were going by appearance alone, Jeanne was masculine. There was the chance that she’d be perfectly in Seyfon’s strike zone.

So maybe she *couldn’t* just write it all off as someone else’s business. She might end up finding herself right in his sights.

“What’re you going to do if he starts hitting on you, Jeanne? What would you think about being the newest member of his harem?”

“Wha—?! *Hell* no! There’s no way anyone’d be into me like that! What kind of man would go for a rough woman like me?! Besides, he’s just not my type!”

“I’m not sure about that first part, you know. And you actually seem pretty feminine to me! What was it again... Something about you having stuffed toys in your room? Really, I feel like you’re more of a pure maiden than you think you are...”

“H-How the hell do you know that, you old geezer?! Iris, don’t tell me you—”

“No! I didn’t tell him anything! Mister must’ve just been making a guess, and — Wait. Huh? You collect soft toys, Jeanne? I thought that huge pile of them belonged to the orphans...”

Jeanne had dug her own grave.

Iris and Jeanne had been relying on Luceris’s hospitality at the old-town church that doubled as an orphanage. But the room that had been assigned to Jeanne was filled to the brim with stuffed toys.

Iris had just assumed they were there for the orphans to play with. But apparently, they were Jeanne’s own possessions that she’d sneaked in without saying anything. Iris was shocked.

“Where were you even hiding all those while you were out working as a mercenary? I’ve never seen you carrying any soft toys with you...”

“*Ngh...* An old friend from the same orphanage was taking care of them for me. But I felt bad just leaving them all with someone else, so I picked them up, and... What? Got a problem?!”

“Come on, don’t get mad at us. It’s just kind of hard to believe that from someone working as a mercenary—that’s all, right?”

“Well, everyone has their own hobbies. It’s not really a problem, is it? Personally, I think it’s kind of cute.”

“*NGRAAAAAAAAAAH!*”

As soon as Zelos called her “cute,” Jeanne collapsed onto the table from embarrassment.

It seemed like she had a bit of a complex about the gap between her looks and her hobby.

“What do *you* think about Jeanne, Zelos? She may not look like it, but she’s a

good cook. And she still dreams about a prince on a white horse coming to pick her up someday.”

“How do you know about that?! I swear I never told you!”

“You know how we went out drinking together the other day? You got drunk and blurted it out. Did you forget?”

“Yeah, I don’t remember that at all... Ugh. I’m never drinking again...”

“Alcohol can lead you down a bad path if you let it, yeah. Or, well, you know what they say—it’s fine to consume alcohol, but don’t let it consume *you*. You should really be more careful!”

The exchange between Jeanne and Lena was teaching Iris just how scary alcohol could be.

Back on Earth, she hadn’t been able to drink any alcohol; she’d been a minor, after all. But in *this* world, she was old enough to drink wine.

Realizing now that a simple error of judgment could see her get carried away drunk and say something weird, Iris vowed then and there to only ever *dabble* in alcohol. She hadn’t actually had any yet, but one time, she’d gotten woozy from the smell alone, so she was probably quite the lightweight.

“So? Zelos, what do you think of Jeanne?”

“If you’re asking how I see her as a woman, then... She’s cute, yes. I’d love to have her as a wife. You know, I’d be happy to take her as a wife right now, if she wanted! I don’t know if I could make her happy, but, well... I’d try, at least!”

“HYAWHAAAAA?! Wha— Wha— What are you *saying*?!”

“So, Mister... Is there any woman you’ve got your eyes on?”

“Let’s see... I’m not sure if ‘got my eyes on’ is the right way of putting it, but looking at Jeanne and Luceris gives me this weird...fluttering feeling around my heart. I don’t know what it is.”

It was something Zelos had never felt before coming to this world.

And the feeling got stronger whenever he looked at Luceris or Jeanne. In fact, he was beside himself with worry that it’d eventually get to the point where he

couldn't hold it in anymore. He'd just told the others the truth, and yet...

For a moment, there was silence.

Lena and Jeanne had serious expressions on their faces.

Or...more accurately, Jeanne's face was beet red, and she kept stealing glances at Zelos for some reason.

How is she so cute, seriously? She's like a purehearted maiden...

While Zelos's inner voice doted on Jeanne, Lena sighed. Her hands were folded, elbows on the table, like a certain famous commander.

"Zelos... That's love syndrome, you know?"

"Hwah?"

"Really. What you've just described is love syndrome, Zelos. Like what we saw on the ship. Going into heat. Remember? It means you've got good chemistry with Jeanne. And Luceris, apparently..."

"Uh... Seriously?"

"Seriously. It looks like Jeanne's feeling something similar—and I can't say for sure, but I'd assume Luceris might be too. How about you take them both as your wives? They're childhood friends too, so you wouldn't have to worry about them getting into fights with each other!"

Zelos was silent.

His mind had stopped working.

All he could picture was the sight of people driven crazy by love syndrome. And then, in his mind's eye, those people all became *him*.

One after another, horrible images flashed into his mind before disappearing and being replaced by the next. A Zelos confessing in some ridiculous way to a woman he loved, and getting beaten up for it. A Zelos being a public nuisance by pouring his heart out like something straight out of an old tragedy play. A Zelos leaping down from some high place, suddenly stripping naked in midair, before diving onto someone and pinning them down.

The more the severity of his situation sunk in, the paler his face grew.

As for Iris, who'd been excluded from the conversation...

"Luceris has...D-cups, right? And Jeanne's an E-cup..."

She was comparing the chests of the two women in question. And then, eventually, her eyes turned to her *own* chest.

"It's their boobs, isn't it?! *Everyone* only ever cares about boobs! So you're the same, huh, Mister?! You just want a woman with a big rack?!"

"Well... I think it's better to have 'em big than not. Depends on the person too, mind you..."

"So you *are* a boob maniac! I knew it! / see how it is..."

Iris was a hurricane of emotions, and Zelos had given her an answer without really thinking it through.

Iris was grabbing Zelos by the collar now and shaking him from side to side...but by this point, he was so shocked by a certain other revelation that he wasn't even aware of what was happening. It was all going in one ear and out the other.

Jeanne watched the two of them, fidgeting.

She had yet to realize, however, that Zelos was no prince on a white horse. No, he was a Destroyer on a black motorbike...

He was a dangerous individual. He wouldn't be flashing her a dazzling smile from horseback; he'd be firing off dazzlingly bright annihilation magic from the seat of his bike. But Jeanne had on rose-tinted glasses, and they stopped her from noticing that.

What she *did* know, now, was that her love syndrome was on the same wavelength as Zelos's. That he was starting to feel the same symptoms that'd been affecting her recently too.

She couldn't stop herself from growing more and more aware of him.

*

"Well," said Zelos, "we ended up on a bit of a tangent there. We should probably get back to talking about work now, eh?"

“The guard job, right? There’s no guaranteeing any of us will be put in charge of guarding that one noble boy, though...” Lena mused.

“Yeah,” Iris replied. “And parties like ours are gonna have to split up when we get to the forest.”

“So we’ve got no clue whether any of us’ll end up with that kid we have to protect, huh,” said Jeanne.

When the students reached the Ramaf Woods for their combat training camp, they’d be split into groups of seven, with each group then assigned a guard. But the mercenaries who’d come for the job didn’t get to choose *who* they were going to guard.

In other words, there was no guarantee that anyone here would be placed with Zweit, the student Duke Delthasis had asked them to protect.

“If we’re unlucky enough to all get assigned to someone else, I can get my three birds to follow him around. They’ll be stronger than some amateur mercenary anyway.”

“You’re talking about the coccos, right? What level are they now? I kinda get the feeling they’ve gotten even stronger since the last time I saw them fight...”

“Yeah... I was wondering the same thing. I know I wouldn’t want to run into them in a forest. They’ve gotta be way stronger than the average monster...”

“Yes—and it sounds like they were really making a name for themselves at the mercenaries’ guild while we weren’t there. What did you *do* to those coccos, Zelos? I know they’re technically just chickens, not your retainers or anything, but...”

They were some impressive chickens, though. One of them alone would be more than enough to take out the average mercenary.

The three of them had grown stronger than the average cockatrice—the final evolution for a wild cocco—and they seemed to be really fixated on how strong they were. They were probably about the best guards you could ask for...as long as you ignored their habit of getting so absorbed in fighting that they forgot what they were meant to be doing.

Still, they were monsters. You couldn't really blame them.

"I'm trying to imagine how that'd work, Mister, but I'm just getting this, like, really *cute* image in my mind..."

"I know, right? This training camp's meant to be pretty tense, but when you picture a few chickens waddling along behind the students, it suddenly feels more heartwarming than anything else."

"They may *look* cute, but I don't think you could find any more vicious guards if you tried. I feel sorry for anyone who goes against them."

"Well, they *are* above Level 400 now. I'm interested to see what'll happen when they evolve."

Jeanne, Lena, and Iris responded to Zelos as one: "*Level 400?!*"

Monsters adapted to match their environment.

For example, goblins living in human territory could be the same level as goblins living in harsh environments, but the latter would be much, much stronger, mostly because they had more combat experience. And it was similar for these cocos: having spent a lot of time lately sparring with Zelos, a Great Sage with a four-digit level, they'd already managed to earn the Limit Breaker skill.

Fighting against stronger opponents sped up your growth, allowing you to rack up experience points like crazy.

At this point, if these cocos *did* end up evolving into their final form—cockatrices—their strength would probably be on par with the average dragon's.

Not to mention, their levels had skyrocketed lately. Zelos had just wanted to raise some chickens, but he was training the things to be mankind's natural enemy, whether he meant to or not.

"Uh, Mister? It sounds like you're turning them into some pretty terrifying monsters... You sure that's a good idea?"

"Well, they're able to understand speech, at least. That should help avoid certain problems. But yes, it's hard to say how many victims there'd be if the

coccos left to go live in the wild now...”

“Really, Zelos, I don’t understand what you’re even trying to do with all this. Do you *want* people to suffer?”

Zelos might not have been *trying* to raise monsters that’d cause problems for humanity, but that was exactly what he was doing.

The three mercenary women could see that—and they fully expected it to end terribly once the coccos were released into the wild.

“No, of course not! The only person I really *hate* would have to be...her.”

“*Ohhh...* That horrible sister of yours, right? But she’s not here, is she?”

“She’s not, thankfully. If she *were*... Well, I’d probably earn my Destroyer nickname all over again. You know how this world works—I could kill her, and I wouldn’t even have to worry about disposing of the body! Heh heh heh...”

“Stop! You’re creeping me out!”

Memories of Zelos’s sister—memories he would’ve preferred to forget—floated into his mind, causing murderous thoughts to bubble up inside him.

He was *trying* to bottle it up, but Iris and the others could still feel enough hate emanating from him to send chills running down their spines. Zelos didn’t feel even a single iota of affection toward his sister, that much was clear.

“Anyway—let’s forget about my sister, eh? As for something that actually matters, I have some items I’d like to give the three of you to keep you safe. I *am* the one who asked you to join me on this job, after all.”

Zelos handed each of his companions the same amulet-and-ring pair that he’d given to Zweit, Celestina, and Croesus.

He’d made these in advance, figuring that since he’d asked the others to join him on this job, it was only right that he give them a little something to help keep them safe.

“These...certainly don’t *look* like anything special, do they?”

“Yeah, but they should be super useful! One of them automatically makes a barrier to protect you from attacks... And from what I can tell, the barrier’s

strong enough that it'd take a really big spell to break it. There's some stuff even my Appraisal's not telling me though."

"W-Wait! Are you sure we can have these?! It sounds like they're some really impressive magic tools! Do you even *know* how much we could get for these if we sold them?!"

"Mmm... Looks like the ring just shows where we are. And it can release the mana inside it to send out something kinda like an emergency signal. Leave it to you to be able to make an item like this, Mister...!"

Back in *Swords & Sorceries*, all five of the Destroyers had been crafters.

It wasn't what they'd been most famous for, given the long list of other anecdotes about their escapades. But they were all excellent at making equipment like this.

Zelos had specialized in creating *spells*, but he'd still made plenty of weapons, armor, magic tools, and more in his spare time.

He could make recovery items like potions too, but that was only something that he'd learned further down the line, when he'd needed to do it to support his party.

"They're free. Just take them. They're yours to use however you want."

"Are you... Are you *sure* that's okay? We could support ourselves without even working for a pretty long time if we sold these, you know..."

"Just getting *these* means it was worth taking the job, huh... These have gotta be worth more than we're actually getting for guarding the students, right?"

"Woooooo! Thanks, Mister!"

Unlike the others, Iris was just plain happy to be given the items.

While Zelos wasn't aware of it himself, each of these amulets he'd just given away was what was known as an Amulet of Protection, and a single one could sell for enough to let you take life easy for about twenty years.

Unbeknownst to the creator himself, he'd made items that were as valuable as coveted magic tools that could be found in ancient ruins. They might have just *looked* like plain, boring pendants at the moment, but if you fancied them

up a bit—set some jewels into them, perhaps—they might easily be considered national treasures.

But Zelos was never the type to fret over how much things were worth.

As a side note, Croesus—who'd received an identical set of items just earlier—was back at the dorm now, beside himself with joy at the present. Not that he intended to let anyone else know about that.

"The camp starts the day after tomorrow. So we can have tomorrow to do whatever we want, like relax a bit after the trip here. After that...well, we'll have to play things by ear. It's all up to luck at that point, after all."

"Yeah. *Woooooo*... I get to go explore the city~!"

"C'mon, Iris... We're not here to play, y'know? We gotta earn some money! So we can *live*!"

"It's hard being poor, isn't it...? Really, Zelos, thanks for getting us this job. Now, what to do tomorrow...? ♪"

Zelos and Jeanne had the same worry: *Should we really be giving these two the day to themselves...?*

And their concerns were on the mark. The next day, Iris made her way into town as if she'd only ever come here to play, while Lena wandered the city in search of carnal pleasure.

On the day of the combat training camp, a number of boys from the lower year levels pulled out from the event, saying they didn't feel up to going.

They'd receive lower grades for that, of course...but for some reason, they all seemed more than happy with what had happened. None of them wanted to go into any detail, though, leaving their classmates confused by the fact that every boy who dropped out suddenly had wobbly legs, barely even able to stand.

Lena, as you might expect, seemed incredibly pleased with herself, and her skin looked incredibly glossy and refreshed.

Carnivores didn't care for time or place. They simply *hunted*—whenever they had the opportunity.

Miska was making her way to the academy library with a calm stride, having split off from Croesus after leaving Zelos's inn room.

This library had originally been intended as a cathedral. But when budget issues had caused work to grind to a halt, its construction had been left half finished.

Years later, when talks had started up about building an academy, the half-finished cathedral had been remodeled and given new life as an open space where the students could all go to learn. And now, it was famous for housing the largest collection of books in the entire country.

Miska climbed the marble stairs and passed through the massive open doorway that marked the entrance. Then she was inside, surrounded by rows of bookshelves, a treasure trove of knowledge.

After looking around for a moment, she spotted two figures sitting at a table. She headed straight there, her gait efficient and elegant.

"I apologize for the wait, Sir Zweit. Milady too—you seem to have been hard at work."

"You're late. Lemme guess—you had to deal with Croesus?"

"I appreciate your understanding."

"How could I *not* understand?! It's Croesus we're talking about. What, did he bring some sigil he's been tinkering with or something?"

"Indeed. He was asking Sir Zelos all sorts of questions about it."

"That happy-go-lucky bastard... You know, I almost envy him."

Croesus simply did as Croesus desired, un beholden to any obligations. It led to some problems sometimes, but he himself seemed perfectly happy with his life.

Zweit, on the other hand, had if anything taken on *too many* responsibilities. He hadn't actively decided to do it; it was just how things had shaken out. It was mostly the fault of his faction, and he was acutely aware of it.

After all, he'd gone from being brainwashed to suffering a bad case of heartbreak. It'd be surprising if he *didn't* hold a grudge toward his faction.

“So, Miska—how was Master? Was he well?”

“I struggle to imagine that he could ever be *unwell*. In the unlikely event that he did come down with an illness, I assume he could simply do something to resolve it himself.”

“Ah, yeah... I *can* see Teach doing that.”

“You’re right. Perhaps I should stop worrying about him.”

It was a bit of a callous thing to say about your teacher.

Still, it was clear why the two of them had agreed with Miska so readily.

“Well, whatever. Did Teach say anything?”

“Yes. Sir Zelos seems to have prepared some magic tools for the two of you, just to be on the safe side. I have them here.”

“Amulets and rings? What do they do?”

“The amulets should automatically protect you against any surprise attacks. The rings, he said, will be able to tell where you are at all times, and release a pulse of mana in an emergency to alert him of the situation. I do not understand the principles on which they work, though.”

“Just what you’d expect from Teach. I’m still amazed he managed to make things like these so quickly, though...”

“Yes! He never ceases to amaze me. Just thinking about his knowledge, his skills... It’s like trying to peer into a bottomless hole.”

Zweit and Celestina were gazing at the items they’d just been given, each letting out a sigh of amazement.

But Miska had another surprise for the two of them.

“He seemed to also have some sort of vehicular magic tool. It had two wheels, and it was fitted with weapons...”

“Huh?! What’s he making *now*?!”

“His garments had a very sinister look to them as well. He was dressed entirely in black, something like a priest. A rather...*ominous* priest, mind you. The sort who might serve the Dark God.”

“That’s just going to make him stand out, though! I thought he was coming here to guard us?”

“On the surface, perhaps. But is there not the possibility that he has come here mostly to carry out *experiments*? Assassins would be the perfect targets for him, would they not?”

Zweit and Celestina didn’t know how to respond to that one. It sounded too plausible to deny.

If Zelos were here, they’d probably have insisted on having a *little talk* with him until they got an answer they were satisfied with. They still weren’t sure how he really saw the two of them.

“It’ll be reassuring to have Teach around. We’ll still have to be careful, though.”

“You’re right. If he’s prepared the same items for me as well, then he must have thought there was a chance that I might be targeted too. And he seems to be taking this all very carefully.”

“Dad must have asked him to do all this. That’s the only thing I can think of. I bet he’s wearing that showy gear as a warning too.”

Zweit knew Zelos didn’t like to stand out—and based on that, he could only see one reason Zelos would be dressed as he was.

Zweit and Celestina didn’t know exactly what was going on, but they could tell that danger was approaching.

If nothing else, they had enough information to know that they should be keeping their eyes peeled.

“I’m not sure we’ll be able to meet Master until we actually get to the camp, at this rate...”

“Everyone goes there together in the one group of carriages, but the mercenaries will be in different carriages from ours. So yeah, you’re probably right.”

“There are so many things I want to ask him, though... It’s a shame.”

“Oh, I should probably mention: apparently Sir Zelos is bringing some

chickens with him as backup. I hear they're quite the ferocious birds."

That surprised both of the siblings. "Wha—?!"

They didn't know about Ukei, Zankei, and Senkei, or just how powerful the three of them were.

And so they were all the more confused by the sudden news that Zelos was bringing *birds* with him.

It would be a little longer until they found out just how strong these chickens were. For now, though, they had absolutely no clue what was going through Zelos's mind, however much they racked their brains trying to think of a reason.

That was a perfectly normal response, of course. Zelos and his acquaintances were all just weird.

Regardless, Zweit and the others were prepared now. It wouldn't be much longer until they headed off to the Ramaf Woods for their training camp.

But his and Celestina's heads were filled with a single, all-consuming thought: *Why coccos?!*

You could never know when some crazy new piece of information was going to come out of nowhere and destroy your ideas of common sense. That was true whatever era you were in.

Or whatever *world* you were in.

Chapter 8: The Old Guy Heads to the Ramaf Woods

All of the mercenaries who'd be going to the Ramaf Woods had gathered together at the mercenaries' guild.

From there, they'd boarded carriages and joined up en route with the vehicles the academy students were in. Overall, there were some forty carriages heading to the woods, making for an impressive caravan.

These carriages had been borrowed from farmers and merchants living nearby, so each had a different capacity. And the larger ones were being used to carry rations and the like; there wasn't enough space for everyone to ride at once. So the students and the mercenaries were all taking turns, alternating between walking and sitting in a carriage, as they made their way to the Ramaf Woods.

The carriages that the students rode in were protected by two platoons of knights, who were also here to help protect the base camp. Inside the woods, though, it'd be up to the mercenaries to guard the students. The mercenaries would also be teaching the students how to harvest materials from the wild and how to get them by taking apart defeated monsters; that was another purpose behind the camp.

The combat training would last for four days, though adding on the time required to get to the woods and back would make it about a ten-day trip.

But of course, spending a whole three days alternating between walking by foot and riding in a carriage could get pretty tiring. So some of the less fit students inevitably ended up running out of stamina partway and, ultimately, giving up on the training camp before they'd even reached the woods.

This camp was intended to raise the students' levels, but it was also a practice run for if they needed to be mobilized and sent to the battlefield in some future emergency. Any who pulled out on the way there were considered unfit for real battle, and had points deducted from their grades for having failed to get in shape beforehand. It could be a real sticking point for the more research-

oriented students.

Croesus was one such example. He'd been walking for two days straight by now, and he was at his limit.

"Uh... Hey. Croesus? You okay there?"

"I'm...managing. Somehow. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to last without getting on a carriage, though."

"Yeah, 'cause you've got no stamina, huh... Sounds like we've still got another hour before we swap, though."

"We have a lot of carriages here, but the basic ones borrowed from farmers only have so much space for people to ride in them. I'm not entirely confident there'll even be space for me."

"You sure you're not just gonna collapse before then anyway? I *told* you to get some exercise in before we went on this trip, man..."

Croesus had no response.

Usually, he spent all of his time holed up in either his bedroom or the laboratory, researching day in and day out.

Of *course* he was going to have less stamina than the average person.

"I wish I'd never become top of the class... Being forced to compete in this farce is such a hassle."

"C'mon, you've gotten this far and you're still complaining? It just means people have high hopes for you, right?"

"I never *asked* them to. I wish they wouldn't all push their expectations onto me like that. It's a hassle, whatever their reasoning."

There were proper reasons for forcing top achievers to take part in the camp. And one of those reasons was to show the lower-performing students what impressive things the top achievers could do—the idea being this would motivate the others to try their hardest. Though honestly, it was hard to say whether it really worked...

By the way, most of those who *chose* to participate in the combat training

camp were students who wanted to become mercenaries.

All students were reservists, potential conscripts for war in times of emergency—but this requirement was relaxed a little if you became a mercenary. After all, mercenaries spent their time going around the country subjugating monsters; they were already working to keep the people safe.

And so it was considered somewhat meaningless to call someone up as a reserve when they were already fighting for the country anyway.

“Seems like your little sister has more stamina than you! Look—that’s her up ahead of us, right?”

“Well... She *did* level up in the Far-Flung Green Depths, apparently. I imagine she *would* have more stamina than I do, yes.”

“Sure looks like it. She’s got a mace too, for some reason. Seems like she’s ready for some real fighting, huh?”

These past two days, Makarov had been impressed by the sight of Celestina—who was wearing academy-designated armor—walking the whole time without ever getting on a carriage.

That armor alone weighed a surprising amount. And Makarov never would’ve expected Celestina—who was small and slender of build—to have the stamina needed to keep walking in it for so long. Levels were one thing; just going by common sense, you would’ve expected Croesus to have more stamina than Celestina, based on their statures. But the reality seemed to be the exact opposite.

“Aren’t you...kinda embarrassed by that, as her older brother?”

Croesus didn’t know how to respond.

As Celestina continued to walk ahead, casually chatting with a beastfolk girl, Croesus could do nothing but stare with envy.

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Celestina was together with her friends, Ulna and Carosty.

Celestina and Ulna had been walking the whole time, but Carosty, who didn’t have much stamina herself, was in a carriage to rest up for a bit. Carosty had

spent most of her time at the academy on mixing and researching things like medicinal herbs. She wasn't suited to what was essentially a large-scale military drill...but she'd skipped so many classes that her grades had fallen.

Of course, she got good grades in alchemy and potion-making. But whenever there was a combat training class, she skipped it and used the time to focus on her research instead. Ultimately, she'd gotten to the point that she had no choice but to take part in this training camp.

"You're not exactly fit either, huh, Carosty? Miss Celestina seems fine, but you're..."

"I-I am simply not suited to tasks such as this! Besides, look! There are boys the same age as us collapsing from exhaustion!"

"Yes. I've done quite a bit of training, Ulna, so it might not be fair to compare me with the other girls here."

"Huh. Wouldn't have guessed it. I kinda had the image of you just sitting by a window reading books, Miss Celestina~."

Ulna had been surprised to see the mild-mannered Celestina bringing a weapon with her, but even *more* surprised to see that she didn't appear all that tired, despite how long they'd been walking.

And that wasn't all; somehow, Ulna could just *tell* that in terms of strength, Celestina was leagues ahead of the other students her age. Beastfolk were good at sizing people up like that.

But Celestina's presence wasn't the strongest one that Ulna could sense here.

"By the waaay, Miss Celestinaaaa... I can feel there's someone *really* strong nearby. Well... Two of them, but one of them's got this super scary vibe."

"Two strong people, you say? I wonder if one of them's Master? I'm...not quite sure who the other might be, though."

"I'm also sensing three other things. I don't know what they are, but they broke off from our caravan earlier and started moving super fast. *They* seem really strong too."

"That would mean that there are, at the very least, five highly skilled

individuals among the mercenaries here to guard us, yes? Even if we assume that one of those is Celestina's private tutor, that would leave us with another four; and I am *most* curious about who they might possibly be."

From talking with Celestina and Croesus, Carosty had found out that Zelos was among the mercenaries.

And she *did* want to meet Zelos—though she'd also be shy about calling out to him for the first time.

After all, she'd heard he just wanted to live a quiet, secluded life. So it wouldn't do for her, the daughter of a marquess, to simply walk up to him and introduce herself. Especially when the man in question had the backing of a duke.

"There are some other people nearby too, by the way. And it feels like they're getting closer..."

"Huh? Can you tell who they are?"

"That *does* make me curious, yes. Why, they could even be a group of splendid gentlemen here to meet us!"

"We're gonna find out pretty soon, I think. Oh! It's her."

As Ulna pointed, a party of female mercenaries came into view.

It seemed like they were chatting noisily among themselves, though, so they hadn't noticed Celestina and the others looking in their direction.

"Urgh... This is *boring*! Can't an orc or something just pop out already?"

"Jeez—don't jinx us like that! Look at how many people we'd have to guard! It'd be a real pain."

"Iris... You sure do say some incredible things for such a cutie, don't you? Put up with it until we reach the forest, at least. I'm holding back my urges too."

"Aww. There's nothing to do, though! Besides, Mister and I would be able to beat, like, pretty much anything anywa— *Heeey!* Lena! I just realized! Don't lump me together with you like that!"

"Uh... You sure those birds won't just take everything out before you get to

it?”

While most everyone else was exhausted from walking, these female mercenaries seemed to have plenty of energy, judging by how noisy they were being.

One of them was a mage who looked about the same age as Celestina, with reddish-brown hair in waist-length pigtails. The others had red hair and chestnut-brown hair, respectively.

But Celestina and Carosty weren't looking at their hair.

“Th-Those are...enormous.”

“Yes. They're amazing...”

Specifically, they were looking at the redheaded mercenary's breasts.

And then, at the same time, the two of them looked down to their *own* chests.

“It's... It's just not *fair*... Those things of hers are as dangerous as area magic.”

“Indeed... How do you get them to— I-I'm simply so *envious*...”

“Huh. Really? They'd just get in the way when you're fighting, though, wouldn't they?”

“She's tall, and she has such a good body. I find her proportions *most* attractive, even as a fellow woman... What is this sense of defeat I'm feeling?”

“I know. I'm feeling the same thing. Especially when I see her breasts. But...”

At least I'm beating that girl with the pigtails!

That thought came from the both of them, perfectly in sync. It brought back at least a bit of their self-confidence.

As is probably already clear by this point, the party the girls were looking at was the one consisting of Jeanne, Lena, and Iris.

It was Jeanne who had given Celestina and Carosty that sense of defeat, and it was Iris who had given them back a sliver of hope.

Iris probably had no idea that her flat-as-a-board chest was helping people

out. Though perhaps it was more a matter of Celestina and Carosty being rude than it was of Iris “helping” them...

“That redheaded lady seems kinda rough, though, doesn’t she?”

“Why, you are being *most* naive, Ulna! Ladies like that are the type to be incredibly feminine beneath their rough exterior!”

“Yes. Somehow I feel like she must be perfect at cooking and cleaning. Perhaps she spends her time reading things like poetry... Oh, and I get the feeling she absolutely loves cute things!”

“H-How can you *tell*?”

Celestina and Carosty had an amazing sixth sense for femininity.

They’d immediately sussed her out as a rival—someone who had what they were lacking—and made some impressively accurate guesses about what kind of person she was.

Ulna, who wasn’t particularly feminine herself, was feeling overwhelmed by the pressure her friends were exuding.

“Oh!”

“What?!”

For some reason, the girl with pigtails—Iris—had suddenly pointed at Celestina and shouted in surprise.

Immediately, Celestina worried: *Wait, did she notice I was thinking something really rude about her?!* A cold sweat of panic started running down her back.

“*Yeah!* See? I knew it! You’re Mister’s student, right? You were, uh... What was your name again?”

“C’mon, Iris... It’s rude to point at people like that, y’know? And... Wait, this kid knows the old geezer?”

“Yeah. He said he did private tutoring, right? I’m pretty sure this girl’s the one he was teaching. I feel like I saw her there when I got saved from those bandits a while ago. And she was calling him Master.”

“Oh! Now that you mention it, I think I *do* remember seeing her back then...

Thanks again to you guys for saving us. We weren't far off from losing our purity to those filthy pieces of scum..."

Jeanne and Iris both thought, *Seriously, Lena? Your "purity"? How many victims did you leave just last night?!*

But they didn't say it out loud. It was a sign of their friendship.

The incident Iris was talking about had happened when she and Lena were out on a job guarding merchants. They'd been captured by bandits on the road—and it was Zelos and his companions who'd saved them. That was when Iris had first seen Celestina.

Not that Jeanne had any way of knowing that. She'd been cooped up in bed with an illness at the time.

"M-Mister, you say? Are you perhaps an acquaintance of my teacher? And... Yes, I feel like I *have* seen you somewhere before... Oh! Were you one of the people we saved when we were coming back from the Far-Flung Green Depths?!"

"Yep! Whew... I was worried for a moment that I had the wrong person! Anyway, if you wanna know why we're here—we tagged along with Mister to work as guards! ♪"

"Yeah. We're staying at the church, so we gotta at least earn *something* so we're not just freeloading. I don't wanna cause any more hassle for Lu than we already have..."

"Th-The church? 'Lu'?! Don't tell me you know Luceris as well?!"

"Oh—you know her too? Yeah, we go way back. We're friends. Grew up at the same orphanage. Small world, huh...?"

"Y-Yes, it seems so..."

Celestina was trying to play it cool, but internally, she was panicking. *I can't tell her. I can't let her know that I was saying some very rude things about her just before!*

You could never tell what kind of connections you might have with people. And in this case, it seemed, they knew each other through Zelos.

“By the way, where’s Master right now? Do you know? I haven’t seen him yet...”

“Mister? Oh...huh. Yeah, where *is* he, actually? He was here with us just earlier...”

KABOOOOOOOOOOM!

All of a sudden, something in the forest nearby flew up high into the air before coming down in a spin and crashing into the ground.

On closer look, that “something” seemed to be a person. But they seemed too dirty to be a mercenary.

Then the women saw another person getting blown out of the forest, just the same as the first.

“Uh... Lena? Are those *bandits*?”

“They look like it. But how could they possibly...”

“M-My word! People are falling from the sky! What is *happening* over there?!”

“Whoa. They’re stuck into the ground where they hit it...”

“I-Is this Master’s doing?!”

“Mmm... Not far off, but I don’t think so. It’s probably those white devils, if I had to guess?”

Celestina’s group had no idea what was going on, but Iris’s group could think of a decent explanation.

It had popped into their heads as soon as they’d realized the cocos were nowhere to be seen.

The students responded together, baffled: “White devils?!”

They didn’t know—and nor did Celestina’s siblings.

Didn’t know that humans weren’t the only ones who were guarding them on this trip...

The “white devils” in question were going around by themselves, eliminating

any obstacles that would get in the way of the camp.

*

Zweit was walking along behind a carriage of mercenaries.

He wasn't really showing any signs of exhaustion, but his friend Diio was staggering forward step by step, leaning on his staff as if he were the haggard victim of some horrible tragedy. He was another one of the students exhausted from walking, by the looks of it.

"You should probably get in the carriage, Diio."

Exhausted, Diio took a moment before responding. "Zweit... Sometimes a man just has to tough it out. How could I possibly get in a carriage when Celestina's been walking the whole time since we left?!"

"C'mon... What's the point if you're catatonic by the time we get there? If you get so stuck on looking cool *now* that you end up useless *later*, you'll only be more embarrassed in the end, right? Seriously, pace yourself. Have a rest."

"I've decided to see this through. Even if it makes me look pathetic. You can laugh. Go ahead. But this is who I *am*..."

Diio was being stubborn.

This too stemmed from his love for Celestina. But Zweit was correct—if Diio pushed himself so hard here that he ended up needing to pull out halfway through the combat training, he'd only cause trouble for everyone else.

That he decided to continue walking in spite of all that was manly, in a sense...but it really wasn't the right time or place.

"What're you gonna say to Celestina if you collapse on the road, huh? Are you gonna tell her, 'Oh, I couldn't bring myself to ride in a carriage while you were walking'? You'd just be making things awkward for her—you *get* that, right?"

"*Ngh!* I guess you're right... B-But I don't want her to think I'm pathetic..."

"She's nowhere *near* us, man! She's way behind us. I'd be amazed if she was even looking at you. Besides, what are you gonna say if you collapse and someone asks you, 'Why didn't you make sure to get enough rest?' Are you gonna use her as your excuse?"

“No... No. That’d be pathetic, wouldn’t it? Fine. I get it, Zweit. I’ll board a carriage the next time we swap.”

“Good. You gotta pace yourself. You don’t wanna be exhausted for the main part of the trip.”

Diio was in love. He wasn’t thinking straight.

He’d been so desperate to leave a good impression that he’d been about to do the exact opposite.

Wanting to show his good side to the girl he was interested in was all well and good, but if he took it too far and caused a problem for everyone else, he’d be showing his most *pathetic* side instead.

It was just... Every time he thought of Celestina and how she’d been getting more and more popular lately, he got worried and moved almost on impulse to try and get the upper hand over any other suitors. And it had been no different here: sure, he should’ve just tried to pace himself, but his head was such a mess that he hadn’t even realized that. He was just that desperate to leave a good impression, whatever it took.

Celestina, for her part, had no idea Diio was into her. In fact, she hadn’t even realized how much more popular she’d gotten lately. She was completely inattentive when it came to her surroundings.

Before long, Diio hopped onto a carriage to rest for a while.

“Oh! Is that Zweit I see there?”

“Who’s th— Huh? Teach?!”

Zweit swung around when he heard someone call his name from behind. And as he did, he saw Zelos...dressed entirely in black.

Zelos was wearing a jet-black robe made of the hide of a black dragon, along with gauntlets and greaves made of an armored black dragon’s carapace. Two sheathed combat knives hung at his waist.

A hat woven out of black ore spider silk and mithril fiber was pulled low over his head, and his eyes were further obscured by a mask. It all made him look like the dictionary definition of an evil priest.

The staff he was holding was jet-black too. Though it was a staff, at its head was the blade and cross guard of a sword, giving it the shape of a polearm. It also had intricate magic formulas etched into it, forming beautiful patterns on the surface. It had been named the Enchanted Magic Staff V-54, and while it looked like the kind of cross-shaped spear used in Hozoin-ryu martial arts, it was nonetheless a proper *staff*, made specifically for a mage to use.

Between the outfit and the weapon, Zelos looked like a priest, yes, but a priest with a decidedly wicked aura.

It was a weird enough look that Zweit had needed a moment to recognize him.

“I thought you had the wrong person for a moment! Miska said you were gonna be wearing something different, but...that really *is* different, huh?”

“Ah... Yes. It was a request from His Grace; he wanted me to use my appearance to show that there’s someone competent protecting the students. I suppose the idea is that any would-be assailants might hesitate to make a surprise attack if there’s an obvious deterrent. It’s sort of an intimidation tactic, essentially.”

“Jeez... Well, you’re definitely standing out, at least. You’re kinda, uh, on a completely different level from all the other mercenaries. And honestly, you just look really *evil*...”

“I’ll be going back to normal once this is over. I know this outfit’s a bit much, after all. Anyway, His Grace is pulling strings behind the scenes for all this, so I think we should be okay for now as long as we keep our eyes peeled.”

“So it *was* Dad... He’s trying to destroy that group of criminals right from the roots, isn’t he?”

“I’m not sure *what* he’s trying to do with all of his maneuvering, really. He’s almost like a mafia don. *Looks* like one too. Certainly doesn’t look like a duke, at least...”

“Don’t expect any answers from me. The guy’s my own dad, and I barely know the first thing about him...”

Duke Delthasis was famous for being an enigma, even among the rest of the

nobility.

When another noble showed him any hostility, he'd cause a complete economic collapse in their territory, and no one quite knew how. Ultimately, that noble would come crawling to him in tears, head bowed, begging for forgiveness.

Put straight, he was merciless to his foes—that was something he had in common with Zelos. But Delthasis was a schemer; rather than doing anything openly, he worked behind the scenes to bring his enemies to ruin. And he was a bit of a loose cannon—not something you'd expect from a noble.

"Seriously, though, if he asked *you* to help out here, Teach... I'm guessing that means there's gonna be an attack on the training camp?"

"From what I was able to get out of him, I think so, yes. And it sounds like that attack might come from an elite few."

"Seems like Samtrol has some tough allies... I swear, I'm gonna beat that bastard to a pulp when I get the chance!"

"Is that, um, 'sandwich roll' guy not taking part in the camp? I've looked over a list of people to keep an eye out for, and if I remember correctly, he had fairly good grades; is that right? Because if he's here, I should mark him now to make things easier on me."

"He should be taking part, yeah. I haven't seen him, though. He's probably..."

"Probably guiding the attackers, right? What a novice, really. Though I suppose he'd make for the perfect sacrificial pawn..."

Samtrol and his bloodline supremacist allies had been there when the students had all set out.

Right now, though, they were nowhere to be seen. They'd split off partway, leaving Zweit and Zelos to assume that they were skulking around in the shadows.

"Who's here apart from you, Teach? I know what Dad's connections are like. Wouldn't be surprised if he's got some other people of his among the guards too."

“Apart from me, there are three mercenaries I know, and...three very impressive coccos.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard that from Miska... Wild coccos, though? Seriously? Are birds like that really gonna be useful?”

“You shouldn’t underestimate them. They can understand language—and most of all, they’re *strong*. Strong enough to take down every mercenary here. Even when I first met them, they were already above Level 200.”

“Seriously?! How the hell do chickens get that strong?! What are you *doing*, Teach?!”

Zelos just silently took out a cigarette, lit it with magic, and filled his lungs with tobacco smoke before letting out a nonchalant puff.

“Don’t just try and play it off! Tell me, what kind of crazy shit have you *done* to those wild coccos?!”

“I’ve just been sparring with them every day. Talking with our fists, as you might say. That’s all. Lately they’ve learned to throw some pretty good punches—or, er, wing-hits, or whatever you’d call them. It shouldn’t be long until they’re proper martial arts masters. Also, specifically, they’re not wild coccos. They’re actually an assortment of different subspecies...”

“They... They *are* birds, though, right? What do you mean, ‘fists’? I don’t get it...”

“Their wings are getting sharper and sharper too. They might even be able to slice through an orichalcum sword before long.”

“How are wings meant to do that?! *Explain* it to me, dammit!”

But Zelos just went back to puffing on his cigarette.

“Don’t think. Feel.”

“I’m *telling* you, I don’t get what that means! How are you meant to ‘feel’ something you don’t even understand!”

“Zweit, my boy, you need to open your mind. Close your eyes. Prick your ears. Right now, in fact. Can you hear them? The screams of a bunch of morons in their final moments?”

“What?!”

Right as Zweit responded in utter confusion, something from about ten meters ahead into the forest went soaring high into the sky.

Then it fell rapidly, spinning, flying down toward the rear of the column before piercing the ground.

“Wh-What was *that*?”

“Probably a bandit, I’d guess? It looks like one of the cocos up ahead found them and took them out in an instant.”

“What’s even *happening*?! That’s just not right! There’s no way a wild coco should be that strong!”

“Zweit...”

“How the hell do cocos turn into such terrifying monsters that they can just *annihilate* people like that?! You must have done something to them, right?!”

“Zweit!”

“What *is* it, Diio?! I’m asking a question right now...”

“Uh, Zweit... You might want to move.”

“Huh?”

SKSHEEEWWW!

Right in front of Zweit, who was rather worked up at this point, another burglaresque man came spinning down from the sky. He pierced the hard, flattened ground of the highway, sending dust and dirt flying up into the air.

“Shit, that was close... And—wait, is this guy...”

“Hmm... No, he’s not dead. Good, good. Seems like they’re figuring out how to hold back. They really are exceeding my expectations...”

“This is them *holding back*?! *Look* at the guy! I’m amazed he isn’t dead!”

“Well, maybe he would be better off dead, I suppose. His luck ran out when those apex predators set their eyes on him.”

“Apex predators? But...they’re... They’re *birds*, right?”

As Zelos had said, maybe the bandit who'd just fallen to the ground here would've been better off dead.

All of his limbs were bent the wrong way, and his whole body was swelling up from the blows he'd received. Usually, he would, in fact, have been dead. But the cocco's Hold Back fighting skill had left him right on the verge of death instead.

"I thought that was a Hurricane Mixer, but it seems like it was actually a Shoryuken, hmm? Can't say I was expecting that one. From the looks of it, I'd say the cocco covered its wing with mana, then made a spinning, supersonic punch...which caused a whirlwind, which launched the bandits into the air in a spin, which made them lose their sense of balance as they fell down to the ground... Seems like it was the big finisher after a nice combo too. They've learned well."

"That's not something a damn *chicken* should be doing! Seriously, how does a chicken even pull any of that off?! And— Wait, there were bandits up ahead?! Don't tell me they were waiting there to ambush us...?"

After thinking about things for a moment, Zweit realized that what he'd seen would have to mean there were bandits lying in wait farther ahead along the highway. Those bandits had then been spotted—and annihilated—by Ukei and the other coccos.

The coccos could understand human language, and their read on the situation had been, *it's okay if we beat 'em up, right?* Unfortunately for the bandits, they'd ended up as target dummies for the three birds to try out their various techniques. They'd been unlucky, that much was obvious.

Zweit was racked with worry about just what kind of crazy creatures Zelos had been raising.

Zelos himself, meanwhile, was just quietly puffing on a cigarette as he stuck out a thumbs-up, a satisfied smile on his face.

"Don't just grin at me like you're happy with a job well done! How am I even meant to respond to that?!"

"Zweit, my dear student, this world is full of unknowns. Don't you think it's

pointless to try and understand everything that's out there?"

"Those 'unknowns' you're talking about creep me out. They don't make any sense..."

"Your teacher's, uh...even crazier than I heard he was, Zweit..."

Diio had only been listening in on their conversation from the sidelines, and even he had cold sweat pouring down his back.

Zelos just ignored his student's reply and kept smoking.

He'd long ago stopped worrying about little details like that.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he'd given up on them.

*

Winding back the clock a little...

A group of bandits were in hiding along the highway headed into the Ramaf Woods. They were waiting for students from the Istol Academy of Magic to pass by.

About a week ago, they'd received a certain job from a noble they were on good terms with.

The job was simple: attack the students. Or rather, they'd been told that as long as they killed the son of a certain noble, they were free to do as they liked with all the rest.

They had no interest in any of the male students, but the *females*... Well, even if they were a little on the young side, they'd still be enough to have some fun with, the bandits figured. Plus, they'd be ripe for sale on the black market. And so, all of a sudden, the men were motivated.

It was a disgusting motivation...but that was just how bandits were.

"They're 'ere, Boss!"

"Right... Bows at the ready. Take out the mercenaries first."

"Been a while since I've had a woman! I don't care if it's a brat. Just lookin' forward to havin' a good time."

“Well, the client told us to leave a few. So we leave some good catches, and then the rest are...”

The bandits had no morals whatsoever. They were willing to lay their hands even on little girls, as long as they had an outlet for their lust.

But today, their luck ran out.

“BOK!”

“What’s *this*? Why’s there a cocco ’ere?”

“Who knows? It’s in the way, so how ’bout we just kill the thing?”

“Yeah. We got no use for birds we can’t eat. These things taste fuckin’ foul.”

BOFF!

The blow came so abruptly that the bandits didn’t even have time to let out a yelp of surprise.

By the time they realized something had happened, the man who’d been next to their boss was already gone. He was impaled against a large tree behind them, the life gone from his eyes.

Specifically, Ukei’s attack had blown him away and slammed him against the tree with a violent impact. He’d died instantly.

“Ba-caw.” (“He died, hmm? This ‘holding back’ thing is tough.”)

“Bokkeh...” (“What are you doing? There’s no point in killing them so soon! Remember, we’re here looking for enemies to train our skills against.”)

“Cakaw. Co-ca-keh...” (“Leader can take us on without us holding back. We’ve spent so long training like that; it’s no simple task now to suddenly start restraining ourselves so we don’t kill anyone.”)

Ukei, Zankei, and Senkei had gotten too strong.

They were able to take out most enemies with a single blow, and if they weren’t careful about it, they could end up killing their allies in the process too. That was why they were here, training: to learn how to prevent that. But it was no easy task.

“Ko-kek...” (“Mmm... We managed to do well enough at that ‘guild’ place, but

I suppose it's not such an easy skill to master.")

"Bob-bo keh." ("Worry not. Fortunately for us, there is no shortage of prey. Allow me to make the next attempt.")

"Bokah!" ("Leave some for me too, okay? I can see you killing every last one of them before I even get a chance to do anything.")

"Cok-ke, cok-ke!" ("The early bird catches the worm. What do you say we compete to see who can take down the most prey? Rest assured, though—I have no intention of losing.")

The others responded together: "Caw!" ("Perfect! A competition it is, then!")

The three cocos turned as one to face the remaining bandits.

They just looked like chickens, sure, but they had a weirdly intense aura emanating out of them.

The bandits had no idea what frightening things the birds had just been "talking" about, but they were getting bad vibes from all this. They started getting ready to flee.

But it was already too late for them.

And so the tragedy began.

Ukei closed the gap in a flash and sent out a punch—if you can call hitting someone with a wing a "punch"—to drive a powerful *thwack* into the jaw of a bandit.

The man's jawbone smashed with a horrible sound. And at the same time, a whirlwind formed, blasting his body off the ground and far up into the sky, out of sight.

"What the... What the *fuck* are these cocos?!"

Next, it was Zankei's turn.

Zankei was simply running, yet somehow it seemed to be leaving behind a blur of afterimages as it moved. And the instant those afterimages passed by the bandits, their weapons and armor all crumbled into smithereens.

Some of the bandits were left with deep gashes in the process, sending blood

spraying all over the place as they fell to the ground.

The bandits had overestimated themselves. And now, they were paying the price—in the form of a terrifying poultry nightmare.

“Bok...” (“Mmm... These scoundrels are too weak. Even holding back, we can’t have a proper fight.”)

“W-WAAAAAAAAAH!”

“R-Run! Run awaaaaaay! These things are crazy!”

“Shit! Something’s *wrong* with these fucking bir— *Gyagh!*”

The bandit stopped midsentence. A single dark feather was sticking out of his head.

Senkei hadn’t shown himself, but they’d cleanly finished off the bandit. They were darting from tree to tree, soaring through the air at will, shooting wing feathers at the bandits for one-hit kill after one-hit kill.

“You *fucker!*”

“Bobok...kocko-kecko.” (“Heh—I’m over *here*. Now... Go to hell.”)

A cocco appeared right behind the bandit, muttering a cool one-liner before stabbing his head with a razor-sharp wing.

Fortunately for this bandit, it didn’t leave him dead. But *unfortunately* for him, the wing pierced his brain in a bad spot, and the powerful toxin coating the wing wreaked havoc on his body. He couldn’t move properly anymore. In fact, he’d be bedridden for the next half a year, at least.

It wasn’t just the coccos’ physical strength that made their attacks scary. There was also the myriad of side effects.

Some of Ukei’s attacks, for example, involved petrification, hardening the target’s body like stone in a way that there was no recovering from. Zankei used deadly poison, which couldn’t be cured by normal antidotes, while Senkei used a powerful paralyzing poison that robbed the target of their ability to move their limbs properly for a while.

The three birds all had largely the same abilities, but each one’s different

fighting style had seen it cultivate these status effects—petrification, paralysis, and so on—in line with how it preferred to fight. Perhaps it was a sign that they were beginning to acquire the abilities of the cockatrice, the evolved form of the wild cocco; but wherever these abilities came from, the birds' impressive levels meant that their status effects packed powerful punches.

The bandits were all left either dead or crying out in agony now. It was a scene straight out of hell.

As soon as the coccos had targeted the bandits, the bandits had been overwhelmed in mere moments, and those who'd lived would be left to regret their wrongdoings for the rest of their days.

Of course, this would only add fuel to the rumors about wild coccos. They started to become a monster that bandits spoke of in hushed, fearful tones.

It bears repeating, though: Ukei and the others were each *subspecies* of wild cocco, not the regular species itself. Though it would be another fifty years or so until scholars figured that out...

*

"Wh-What the hell is...?"

"What *are* these things?!"

"They failed, huh... Shit! Zweit, you lucky bastard..."

Everyone leaped on Samtrol's remark: "This has *nothing* to do with luck! There's something fucking *wrong* with those coccos!"

The members of the bloodline supremacist faction, who'd hired the bandits to attack the students, had been using the Farsight bloodline magic to observe how things went.

Bloodline magic had been created in ancient times, when experimental magic was installed into the bodies of criminals to see how it would affect them. Usually, magic formulas were formed inside a person's subconscious—but as more and more experiments had been carried out, the different formulas in the criminals' bodies had interacted with each other, causing them to morph into some rather unusual magic.

Another curious point was that for some reason, this magic was passed down specifically matrilineally. Mages from the ancient times had never managed to find out why this was the case—and then, in all the turmoil of the Dark God War, the criminals had been released.

Since this was passed down hereditarily, those who possessed it had started saying that they came from “a legitimate mage bloodline, one that can be traced back to the ancient times.” But between the hereditary nature of their magic and the fact that all of these spells were twisted, unusual variants of regular magic, these mages struggled to learn other spells. The maximum capacity of their subconscious was lower than that of regular mages.

Farsight was one such spell. It allowed the caster to project an image of what was happening at a location within range onto a crystal ball or another such magic conduit. On first listen, it sounded convenient...but no matter how hard the caster tried, they’d struggle to even get the range up to one kilometer. And the wider the range, the more mana the spell consumed. It was awkward to use.

Incidentally, there was a skill—Hawk Eye—that similarly let the user see long distances, making the bloodline spell fairly useless, for the most part. It was easier to just learn the skill than it was to use Farsight.

“That cocco had some sort of collar on it! Has someone been keeping it? *Training* it?”

“That doesn’t make sense! Who’d be able to train a monster as strong as that?! Even *regular* coccos are hard enough to deal with!”

“I got the vibe they’re protecting the students. So probably...”

“Probably someone paid by Duke Solistia, huh...? The things *look* stupid, but they’re terrifying in a fight...”

The bloodline supremacists, Samtrol included, had been left frozen with fear, *shock*, from seeing just how out-of-the-ordinary these coccos were. They’d managed to take out a group of bandits with next to no effort, after all. Clearly they weren’t normal.

They weren’t even *close* to normal.

“M-Maybe they were living in the Far-Flung Green Depths? And someone tamed them?”

“So you’re saying that there’s someone out there even *stronger* than those damn chickens, then?! What’re we gonna do about this? If this gets out, we’ll be labeled as *criminals*!”

“I don’t wanna have any part in that shit! Samtrol started this all by himself!”

“Yeah! Right? We can just blame *him* for everything.”

Samtrol’s carefully laid plans had suddenly backfired.

His own “comrades” had started to abandon him, leaving him more alone than ever before.

The bloodline supremacists had been around for a long time, and they were at least a competent enough group that they’d managed to keep some ties with the underworld.

But all that really set them apart was the fact that they possessed magic from birth, and flawed magic at that; that was all. There was nothing to actually justify all the pomp with which they carried themselves. They were just a group of insecure individuals with persecution complexes, wanting to hold others back from success.

Sure, some of them had powerful bloodline magic. But such magic always had problems; it was inevitably risky, or narrow in scope, or something else. A lot of bloodline spells were useful, but they weren’t ideal.

Further, despite the fact that they’d achieved virtually nothing whatsoever, the bloodline supremacists were incredibly arrogant, earning them scorn even from other mages.

“Fuck! If only we had someone here with the Precognition bloodline spell, this never would’ve...”

“That bloodline’s already died out, hasn’t it? What’s the point in wishing for something that doesn’t even *exist* anymore?!”

“Damn prick’s desperate for power, but he only ever tries to get there through dirty tricks...”

Everyone here seriously believed that they were *better* than other people; hearing snide remarks from their comrades infuriated them to no end. And the more pride they had, the truer that was.

“I hate to admit it, but we’ll have to leave the rest to *them*...”

“They’re gonna fail too, though, right? How does anyone win against *those* things?”

“Guess our organization’s done for, huh? We got the wrong guy angry...”

But it was far too late to start regretting things.

At the end of the day, they were all just students, ill-suited to a world of intricately connected schemes and trickery. Their specialty was harassing people; they were good at *that*. But as soon as they made an enemy of a ducal house—a house with the might of the country at its beck and call—they’d lost. They still hadn’t realized that, though...

They were ultimately all just spoiled kids.

“Fine. I guess we’ll just have to head to the meeting point.”

“Make sure *you* take responsibility, all right? Don’t drag *us* into it.”

“Yeah! You’re the one that started all this! We had nothing to do with it!”

Samtrol sent them a silent glare.

The students here were still under the delusion that they were safe. They were still too immature to realize how wrong they were.

Ultimately, these bloodline supremacists started making their way to the meeting point with the assassins, as they’d originally planned to.

Bremait, though, was nowhere to be seen among the group.

No one knew where he’d gotten to.

Chapter 9: The Old Guy Arrives at the Ramaf Woods

The Ramaf Woods was a sprawling forest in the center of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia.

And it was home to a great number of monsters—albeit not as many as the Far-Flung Green Depths.

The forest was a good place to collect herbs, ores, monster drops, and so on, so most people who went there were mercenaries and scholars looking to earn some money. But it was also famous as a training destination for knights and mages alike.

As for why the place was such a perfect habitat for monsters, there was a widely accepted theory from a certain scholar: that mana running through the land built up somewhere in the forest.

Specifically, the theory supposed that mana that ran through the Far-Flung Green Depths eventually accumulated in the Ramaf Woods, and that *that* was what made it such a good environment for monsters to live in. None of that had been proven yet, though.

“So this forest is supposedly sitting on a ley line, eh? Really, it feels like the more I hear about the Far-Flung Green Depths, the more questions I have about the place. I suppose all of the flora and fauna there *did* seem to have a lot of life to them, so it’d make sense...”

“People say there’s mana from a dragon vein running right under Santor too. But no one’s been able to prove it.”

“Ah... That could be why the mandrakes were reproducing like crazy. So it was thanks to mana running below the ground, hmm? I assume that’d be having a bit of an effect on the other vegetables too.”

As the students and mercenaries worked to set up camp just outside the Ramaf Woods, Zelos and Zweit were chatting about the area.

The monsters here were rather strong and dangerous, even if they weren’t

quite as bad as what you'd find in the Far-Flung Green Depths.

"By the way, speaking of Stihla—I noticed the road heading there was really wide. Is there a fort nearby or something?"

"Yeah. The country's biggest stronghold's right near the city, so they made the road heading there wide. That way it's easier to transport troops, food supplies, stuff like that. There are some spots along the way where the road gets narrow, but that's just because the terrain meant they couldn't make it any wider there. So those spots get used for ambushes."

"I *do* remember the road suddenly narrowing at one point, yes. I thought my trailer was going to fall off the road!"

"What kind of crazy thing did you use to get to Stihla, Teach...?"

Zelos thought for a bit about how he should answer Zweit's question.

There were a lot of people around right now. It probably wasn't a great idea to give too many details out loud.

"Well... Let's just say it's a magic tool. A little toy that people can get in and use to travel."

"A 'toy'? I feel like that's underselling how hard it is to make magic tools... I bet Croesus was ecstatic about it too, whatever it was. The guy's got nothing in his head but magic, I swear..."

"Oh, you wouldn't *believe* how many questions he bombarded me with. Just an endless barrage of 'What's this?' and 'What does this do?' Thanks to that, it ended up taking us quite a while to change out the equipment on the thing."

"Jeez... That moron... Wish he'd learn to hold it in every now and then."

Croesus had *really* gotten interested in Zelos's Harley-Sanders Model 13.

Zelos still wasn't entirely happy with the design of the thing, though. Or rather, he didn't have any problems with the bike itself, but he *did* have issues with the sidecar Croesus had helped him to attach.

After all, he hadn't even had a chance to test it out yet. He had no idea how well it'd actually perform.

His main concern was balance. Now that he'd fitted a case of magical artillery to the sidecar, he struggled to imagine that the bike would still be all that stable. In fact, he was worried the whole bike might get blown back from the recoil as soon as he fired the thing.

He'd just repurposed some garbage he'd had lying around, after all. It was an untested setup, and he'd need to do that testing to get any idea of how it worked.

"I guess I'll have to redesign it all properly at some point. For now, I've just recreated what I was able to remember and fitted it with random junk I had lying around. Probably *is* pretty dangerous..."

"What are you talking about, Teach? I still don't know what you came to Stihla in..."

"About the simplest way I can describe it is 'a huge toy,' I suppose? And an unfinished one, at that. I *have* already had an accident or two in it, but...well, I was able to get everyone here without anyone dying, so that's a good start."

"What the *hell*?! Should you really be that casual about safety? That's usually the *first* thing you work out! *Before* you start making something! It's a magic tool, isn't it? They're dangerous!"

"I didn't have much time, you see. I just kept adding random bits to it as I went, and, well, it ended up as a bit of a weird-looking mess. I would've liked more time to improve it. As is, I just gave it my best shot, right up until the last minute, and... Well, it ended pretty badly. Aha ha ha."

"Uh... You sure those 'random bits' weren't the problem? And it doesn't sound like you should be laughing about this..."

The momentum of Zelos's trailer had threatened to make him lose control of the bike when he'd gone around a sharp corner on his way to Stihla. He'd just barely managed to keep his balance.

Some of Zelos's companions had been resting for a while to try and get over their travel sickness, and so he'd tried to make up for lost time by going faster for a bit...only to almost end up crashing. In fact, that had happened more than once.

It had even forced him to deploy the good ol' cliché: slamming his feet into the ground to help him brake faster.

“Hmm... Should I have gone with more of a Batmobile type of design? So, a car, but with a motorbike that can split off if the car gets damaged...?”

“Uh... What? Don't ask me. What are you even talking about?”

Zelos had several powerful motors available. He wouldn't really have a problem making a Batmobile, if he wanted to.

He was only realizing that now though—and thinking back, he'd already been cutting it pretty close trying to get the bike finished before the trip. Not that Zweit knew any of that, of course.

“Zweit!” shouted Diio. “C'mon! Stop running your mouth—can you actually help out? We need a hand.”

“Oh, sorry. My bad. I'll be there in a sec.”

“So the students are in charge of their own tents, eh? They sure are keeping you all busy.”

“Part of it's training, if we ever have to go to war. Mages can be conscripted, and that includes us students. Damn, I envy mercenaries for being able to turn that down...”

“I can't imagine the students here would be all that *useful* in war, though. Even if some of them built up some combat experience here, I doubt they'd be able to cooperate with the military. They don't have the kind of knowledge they'd need to carry out military operations, or so I'd assume. It'd just be sending them off to their deaths, wouldn't it?”

“A lot of the students in this camp are hoping to become mercenaries. They'll end up learning stuff through combat sooner or later anyway. No point worrying about 'em.”

Zelos felt like any students who tried to become mercenaries to avoid conscription were putting the cart before the horse.

When you joined the mercenary guild, you weren't just given a guild card, but also a manual detailing your obligations. And until you reached a certain rank,

one of those obligations was still to take part in war. It was only by rising through the guild ranks that you'd finally manage to get away from that.

Besides, mercenaries had to undertake guild requests at least every so often—if they didn't, their mercenary registration would be canceled, and they'd have to register from scratch again. And that reregistration would carry penalties, such as a lower rank. Combine that with all of the other little rules written in the manual, and being a mercenary was a bit of a hassle.

Zelos didn't really care whether his guild card expired or not, but Iris did—and if a war broke out, she'd be sent to the battlefield, whether she wanted to go or not.

If you didn't know much about how things worked, you might assume that simply becoming a mercenary meant you couldn't be conscripted anymore. But that wasn't the reality. As part of a ducal house, Zweit would have to take part in war either way; perhaps that was why he was ill-informed of those sorts of details.

Higher-ranked mercenaries could avoid conscription at least partly because of their value. It took a long time to train up skilled mercenaries, and by the time they got there, they were too precious a resource to waste. Any who were lost to war would have to be replaced, and that was no easy task—hence their freedom from the draft. Though even then, that was merely replaced with the obligation to train new mercenaries...

The threat of monsters was never far away. Everywhere you looked, there was a real shortage of capable personnel.

"Anyway, I gotta go. Diio's calling for me. Ugh, it's been ages since the last time I had to set up a tent..."

"I suppose I'll go and help set up the mercenaries' tents, then. Though I've brought my own tent, for what it's worth."

"Look, Teach... If you've got your own tent, use it. I've heard there are all sorts of scumbags among the mercenaries—thieves, rapists, everything. The last time I took part in combat training, there was a guy who got dragged into another tent, and, uh...*used* in place of a woman."

“Seriously? Mercenaries, I swear... Well, between that and the coccas, it probably *is* for the best that I use my own tent, I suppose.”

There probably wouldn't be any mercenaries with unusual enough tastes to try to assault a middle-aged man like Zelos. Still...there were exceptions to every rule, and he'd experienced that himself. He figured it was better to be safe than sorry.

Zelos was the type of person to take *thorough* countermeasures against things he dreaded.

As soon as he and Zweit went their separate ways, Zelos headed over to the mercenaries' area to stake out a spot for his own tent.

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“Whatever am I supposed to do with this? Why, I've nary an *inkling*...”

“If I recall correctly, it was for...putting together the frame? I *think* we put it inside this fabric here and secure it to the ground, but...”

“What do I do with the hammer? Not really sure... Huh?”

Celestina and her friends were struggling to pitch a tent.

Carosty was a sheltered rich girl; she'd never gone camping or anything of the sort. So of course, she had no experience pitching a tent. Celestina, for her part, had gone on that one combat training trip to the Far-Flung Green Depths, but the knights had set up the tents then, so she didn't know exactly what to do.

It was similar for Ulna. And beastfolk weren't in the habit of using things like tents anyway.

If you wanted to compliment the beastfolk, you'd say they were easygoing, laid-back; if you were trying to do the opposite, you'd say they were careless, sloppy. But however you spun it, the fact of the matter was that they preferred sleeping out in the open over pitching a tent. It was things like this that caused some to call them an uncivilized race—but really, it was just that most beastfolk didn't particularly care about the little details.

If there was a particularly convenient tool out there, they'd do their best to learn how to use it. But they didn't like things that were a hassle, so they

avoided the likes of, say...tents that required you to put together a frame out of pipes. They didn't see anything wrong with simply sleeping on the ground anyway.

"I'm aware that students can be conscripted into the military, but they should teach us this sort of thing in a class first! My *word*, how do they expect us to simply achieve the task without ever explaining how it should be done?! It is quite impossible!"

"*Ugh...* What's this pipe meant to connect to? Huh? It's the wrong length... Wait, what's this rope? Argh, I just don't *get* it!"

"What's this big bag for? The pipes were wrapped up in it, but it seems a little too large to have just been for that... Hmm. I wonder..."

For the two sheltered noble girls and Ulna, who'd been friendless until recently and had never been camping, this sort of manual labor was no easy task.

Making matters worse, each group was forbidden from asking their neighbors for advice on setting up their tent, and the teachers were constantly going around and keeping an eye out to watch for any rule-breakers. The commoner students were generally doing pretty well, but the nobles were struggling. No one had been given a manual for setting the tents up either, so it was a given that any first-timers would struggle.

"The stakes are meant to be driven into the ground, but I'm not quite sure how to put together the frame. There are narrow pipes and thick pipes; and what's this little string for?"

"You sure we can't just sleep on the ground? We wouldn't be bothering anyone, right?"

"I *refuse*! However would I change my clothes? Surely you cannot expect us to do something so indecent in plain sight!"

"Huh~? I don't really care, y'know? Not like you die if someone sees you."

Carosty and Celestina were unanimous in their response: "I don't think that's the kind of thing a girl should be saying..."

Ulna had no sense of shame.

She might have been raised in an environment full of humans, but at the end of the day, she was a beastfolk girl—a girl of the wild.

“Ulna... You’re a girl, okay? You should really worry about people’s gazes a little bit more.”

“I concur! Also, I have been most curious about something for a while: why is it that you simply call me Carosty, yet you refer to Celestina as *Miss Celestina*?”

“Mmm? I mean, Miss Celestina’s just Miss Celestina, y’know? And Carosty’s Carosty. What’s so weird about that?”

“I *am* also a noble, myself... Why is it that you do not refer to *me* as ‘Miss’? It doesn’t sit quite right with me!”

Ulna tilted her head in silent confusion. She was seriously having a hard time understanding what Carosty was trying to get at.

Beastfolk had a strong sense of duty—they showed respect to their benefactors, or to the strong. But apart from that, they didn’t really care about this kind of thing. Ulna was addressing Celestina with respect because she was one such benefactor—specifically, Celestina had saved her from being bullied.

She was mostly just distinguishing the two by instinct, though. It wasn’t like she was actively trying to rank people by importance.

In short, it was like Celestina had picked up an abandoned puppy—and that puppy had gotten attached to her.

Given how Ulna looked pretty much the same as a human, you couldn’t exactly blame Carosty for judging her by human standards, and for feeling slighted as a result. But Ulna was a beastfolk, and beastfolk didn’t really have any concepts of categorizing people by things like authority or social standing.

Celestina tried her best to explain all that, an awkward smile on her face. Carosty slowly nodded.

“Ah. So even if beastfolk live among humans, they continue to abide largely by their instincts; is that correct?”

“It surprised me too, at first. I’d prefer that she just called me by my name,

but she keeps insisting on that ‘Miss,’ however many times I ask her to leave it out. Honestly, Carosty, I’m envious of you.”

“Is that so? I must say, that comes as a surprise. I would have assumed it was something you had agreed to...”

“Being referred to with an honorific like that makes me feel kind of...alienated? I just want people to talk to me casually. In fact, I actually sort of envy people who get called by nicknames and things.”

“She hardly seems formal around you in any manner apart from calling you ‘Miss.’ Is it really something for you to be so concerned about?”

“That’s the one saving grace, I suppose. I wouldn’t like it if she felt any need to be formal around me, or to always do as I say...”

Celestina was the child of a mistress. She wasn’t used to being referred to with formality and respect, and she didn’t like it.

Fortunately, while Ulna did call her *Miss* Celestina, she was entirely free-spirited and unreserved around her in every other way, chatting with her whenever she felt like it. Celestina was still a little put out by how Ulna referred to her...but more than anything, she was happy to have gotten a friend. She was willing to put up with that much.

“Ah...”

“Oh?”

As Celestina moved her head to look at the sudden voice, she saw a middle-aged man, dressed entirely in black, walking along as he casually puffed on a cigarette. It was a clear breach of etiquette—not that there were any rules about that in this world.

“What?! D-Don’t tell me... Is that you, Master? Why are you here?!”

“I was just walking along with Zweit earlier, you see. I’m curious, though; were you really able to tell who I was, with how I’m dressed?”

“I wasn’t, at first glance. Anyway, what are you doing here, Master?”

“Oh, me? Just on my way back to join the rest of the mercenaries. Our tents are set up in a different place than the students’, after all.”

Teaching students to watch out for themselves was one of the aims of this camp, so they were to sleep in a separate area from the mercenaries guarding them. It *did* mean that the mercenaries weren't always able to protect the students, though, so Zelos was rather annoyed with this little rule.

"Are you sure you couldn't just stay here? You're here to guard my brother, after all; surely it wouldn't be a problem?"

"Ah... Thing is, that's just something like a personal request. *Officially*, I'm taking part as a mercenary. There's no guarantee I'll be put in charge of protecting Zweit."

The mercenaries would all be drawing lots tomorrow to randomly determine which party of students they'd be paired with.

And as long as Zelos didn't know who was getting paired with whom, it didn't hurt to prepare for all sorts of different possibilities.

"I haven't seen you once these past three days, Master. Where have you been?"

"I've been going off ahead to clear out monsters and things. Oh, and helping the cocos with their training. Guarding Zweit too. That's why I'm here, after all."

"Is it really such a dangerous situation?"

"Well, the bandits from earlier were saying they were hired by some noble. Whoever it is, I doubt they've given up just yet."

After the cocos had annihilated the bandits, some mercenaries had taken the bandits off to a nearby fort using the bandits' own carriages.

Those of them that had survived, at least; half had been killed in horrific ways. Even most of the survivors were wounded, with injuries ranging from light to severe. Most likely, the badly wounded bandits would simply be executed rather than turned into criminal slaves.

After all, it was cheaper to just deal with the lightly wounded ones, rather than start by healing every bandit who'd been caught. Criminals had no rights here.

Celestina sighed. “Why did things have to end up like this? Brother did nothing but point out mistakes people were making! I never would’ve thought that would lead to...”

“Some people out there are all ambition and no talent. They don’t listen to other people, there’s no limit to their arrogance, and they feel like it’s only natural for them to look down on everyone else.”

“But haven’t there been ambitious people throughout history who’ve been called champions?”

“From what I’ve seen looking things up, most of those champions were people who had some sort of dissatisfaction with the laws in their country; people who served under fools. They might have been ambitious, yes, but they were rational about it, and talented, and they cared about the citizens. *Those* are the sort of ambitious people who find success.”

“So you’re saying that people who are only ambitious for their own sake don’t achieve their goals? These people my brother was talking about—the bloodline supremacists, he was calling them—is their bloodline magic really all that amazing?”

“Magic passed down hereditarily is nothing too impressive, no. I mean, they have it right from birth. It just takes up space in their subconscious their whole lives, and even when they use it, it doesn’t usually do anything worth making a fuss about. On rare occasion, yes, there can be a powerful bloodline spell. But even then, you need to practice and get better at it; not everyone’s going to master whatever magic they have. Besides, they’ll be limited in how many spells they can learn, and they won’t be able to use *actually* powerful magic. Honestly, I’d recommend that those people specifically become something *other* than a mage.”

Monarchies were all over the place in this world, and there tended to be quite a lot of royals who got an inflated sense of self-worth and started looking down on the common people.

It was a similar story for nobles too. They’d get a taste of power; start looking down on the commoners, who’d then incite an uprising against them; and ultimately, they’d lose their positions. It happened all the time. Afterward, the

ringleader would usually pull some strings to spread the word about how their rebellion was justifiable under the law, and they'd go down in history as a champion.

In other words, it was important for leaders to have the support of the public, and those who ignored that often found themselves destined for ruin. Though of course, there were still plenty of politicians who managed to die a peaceful death after a life of evil. Not every rebellion succeeded.

Regardless, it was well established that nobles behaving arrogantly could lead to rebellion. But that didn't stop bloodline mages from going on to do just that from time to time—often leading to a great many deaths. That had been the case for bloodline mage NPCs who'd appeared in *Swords & Sorceries* too. In fact, Zelos had gotten a real sense of déjà vu on finding out how the nobles were in this world.

Were those really NPCs? And if they weren't NPCs, but real humans, then...what even was the world in Swords & Sorceries? Why was it made?

This world and the world from the game were similar, but they had plenty of differences too.

Still, one of the things they shared was that bloodline mages had a real habit of inciting rebellions.

Back in *Swords & Sorceries*, Zelos had punched a mage NPC who'd inherited bloodline magic, and the sensation of hitting them had felt no different from reality. In fact, it had felt so real that it had ended up seeming...wrong, somehow.

Their attitudes had been just as unbearable in the game, making it harder and harder to figure out the border between game and reality. Zelos was starting to have some real questions about it all—questions that had never even occurred to him before his reincarnation.

“By the way... Are you sure you don't need to help set up that tent? The two other girls you're with have really been glaring at me for a while now.”

“Hm? *Wah!*”

Behind Celestina was a still-decidedly-unpitched tent, along with Carosty,

glaring over at Celestina and Zelos with disgust.

Ulna, for her part, was just copying Carosty.

“I do not mind you speaking with an acquaintance of yours, Celestina, but could I ask that you not forget about the two of us?”

“Sorry! I was just happy to see him, so I got carried away...”

“Is this old guy your teacher, Miss Celestina? Whoa, he looks kinda, uh... Scary.”

Ulna had come up to Celestina full of energy, but her tail and her beastfolk ears flattened the instant she picked up on Zelos’s aura. Her first impression was that he wasn’t someone she wanted to make an enemy out of.

“Hmm... Looks like you girls are having a tough time setting up that tent, eh? Let’s see... Ah, with this one, you need to put together the frame to support it, then set it up inside that bag-shaped sheet. It’s a bit of an old-fashioned one...”

“M-Master! We were told we can’t get advice on how to set up our tent while we’re training...”

“Does that include the mercenaries too? Surely your teachers must’ve known that a bunch of students with no experience are going to struggle if they’re just told to put up a tent with no instructions.”

“Oh! Now that you mention it, I don’t think they mentioned anything about not being able to ask the *mercenaries* for help...”

Celestina was finally realizing this additional reason for the combat training camp: it was a way of getting the students used to interacting with mercenaries in times of emergency.

If war broke out, they’d need to work with mercenaries to carry out complex military operations. So by having the students interact with the mercenaries now, the idea was that the students would learn all sorts of things from the mercenaries. It wasn’t like knights and nobles would be the only ones on the battlefield, after all.

“I suppose I’ll have to help you out, then. You really *do* seem to be struggling with it.”

“Th-Thank you... At this rate, I wasn’t sure we were ever going to be able to rest.”

“So—you’re with a noble girl and a beastfolk, eh? Seems like not a single one of you is suited to this sort of work... Beastfolk aren’t the type to bother with this kind of thing anyway, are they?”

As Zelos was saying, the composition of Celestina’s party wasn’t perfect.

None of them were able to do the basic tasks of setting up camp—though it wasn’t helped by the fact that their tent was an old-fashioned one, with a lot of different components.

The frame was made of iron too, so it was heavy. It all added up to a job that was almost insurmountable for the three girls alone.

With a sigh, Zelos decided to help them out. This training wasn’t just intended as an opportunity for students to get familiar with mercenaries, but also for the students to learn how to set up camp.

Eventually, they were done. Celestina and the others finally had a place to sleep for the night.

As a side note, Zelos’s tent was a pop-up tent. It earned him a cold eye from all the students who’d been working hard to set up their own tents.

Zelos has simply copied some outdoor gear from back on Earth—but to them, it felt incredibly unfair.

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The next morning, the students were finally about to begin their combat training camp in earnest.

They’d simply be going into the Ramaf Woods, finding monsters, and defeating them. That was it. But for the students from the lower year levels, this would be their first time experiencing real combat. Some of the older students were in the same boat too, though most of those were only here for the extra credit.

An important thing in this training camp was where, exactly, you ended up. In some parts of the forest, you might not even end up fighting once. Basically,

there was a significant chance that weaker monsters would run away as soon as you encountered them, making your trip there a waste of time. Sure, you could try to actively *find* monsters, but luck played a big part in that too. And so most of the students were bouncing between nerves and excitement.

First, though, they had to eat breakfast.

Plenty of the students here could barely even move after three days of walking. They needed to eat a proper meal to get back some energy, or they wouldn't be able to go any further. If they pushed on with an empty stomach, they'd be at a real risk of dying, however weak the monsters they encountered were.

Some of the carriages that had been brought along were essentially food carts, fitted with cookware. These carriages had been prepared by the mercenaries' guild, and a handful of cooks were already staffing them, preparing food for everyone. They were a lifeline for the students.

A number of mercenaries would be positioned to guard these carts and the food supplies. But as Zelos looked over at the cooks preparing breakfast, he began mumbling to himself, confused.

Iris called out to him, curious about the puzzled look on his face.

"What's up, Mister?"

"Ah, it's just... Those cooks are *strong*, you know? Do they even *need* guarding?"

"You're right... Those are some trained bodies. Not what you'd expect from cooks. They almost look like some kinda...elite soldiers? Special forces guys?"

"Yes. Something about them looks very...metal. *Solid*. I can imagine them now—hiding in a cardboard box, sneaking up to some enemy, taking them out from the shadows..."

All of the cooks were dressed as you'd expect cooks to be, but they had knives of all different sizes sheathed in leather belts, while separate belts around their waists were fitted with containers of spices and the like.

Each one was gazing at their ingredients with the eyes of a hunter staring

down their prey. They flashed wild grins at the ingredients laid out in front of them, then got to preparing those ingredients in a flurry. Their impressive skills were obvious.

“Season the scorpion for me!”

“Don’t ya worry—I’ll do it up real good. You handle the meat on the left. And don’t ya go screwin’ it up, ya hear me?”

“Who do ya think yer talkin’ to? I *never* screw up with meat!”

“*Ngh...* Enemy reinforcements on the way! We need backup, Cap’n!”

By “enemy reinforcements,” the cook must’ve meant the students lining up for food. And the “cap’n” was none other than the head chef.

“They’re on me too! Hold out for ten minutes! I’ll get there soon!”

“More enemy reinforcements, on me! Where’s my resupply?! I ain’t gonna last much longer!”

“*Tch!* Damn starvin’ wolves... They can’t even wait a minute, the lot of ’em!”

From their dialogue alone, you’d never think they were just cooking.

They were on a battlefield—the battlefield known as a kitchen.

“This is... What should I say? All the tension in the air makes it very interesting to watch, at least...”

“Yeah, it’s making *me* nervous just watching it! Kinda feels like they’re in a war or something, huh...?”

“They’re pros. They put their lives on the line to make sure the food gets on their customers’ plates, whatever the circumstances. Still... I’ve heard people say the kitchen is a battlefield, but actually seeing it play out in front of me is kind of amazing.”

“Look at how quickly they’re fending off all those starving monsters! Who even *are* they...?”

Iris and Zelos were almost forgetting to breathe as they watched the culinary soldiers fight their terrifying battle.

It was a serious fight. A hardcore mission. One where even the slightest

mistake would mean failure.

The cooks were using their food to rout all of the customers in line, dealing tactical strikes to their stomachs one at a time.

Their assignment: the complete suppression—or rather, satisfaction—of their “foes.”

“Anyway, that sure does look tasty... How about we get in line too?”

“Yeah, we should. Just smelling it from over here’s already made me hungry!”

With all the fragrant aromas wafting over, the two of them could hardly be satisfied just *looking* at the food. The scent was dealing a direct hit to their stomachs. And it was having an even more potent effect on all the people in line.

The smells of the cooking left them unable to bear their appetites. It was like they were being shot by snipers.

“More reinforcements! They’re hittin’ us with a surprise attack!”

“*What?!* Hold out! Whatever ya need to do, do it! Hang in there ’til we get ya resupplied!”

“Yessir! We’ll hold the fort, even if it kills us!”

“This is Viper speaking! Supply is ready! We can deliver the package whenever you need!”

“Right—time to hit ’em with a counterattack! Don’t go dyin’ on me now, maggots!”

“*YESSIR!*”

The fierce battle continued to rage within the camp at the outskirts of the Ramaf Woods.

An hour later, the culinary soldiers wore satisfied expressions of a job well done as they gazed over the fallen bodies of the beasts who’d attacked them—that was, the students and mercenaries, who were now too bloated to even move.

They’d all survived another day on the battlefield. But there was no time to

waste: they already had to prepare for the next battle...dinner.

Life for the culinary soldiers was a never-ending war.

*

Satisfied with their breakfast, the students and mercenaries were finally about to set foot in the Ramaf Woods.

All that remained now was to form groups. But the students were relaxed about it, all simply forming teams with their friends and classmates.

It was Zelos and his companions who were anxious. If none of them got assigned to Zweit, their job was going to get a whole lot harder. They were all praying for a lucky draw, but...

It was time.

The lots were drawn.

Silence.

Not a single one of them had been put in charge of guarding Zweit.

It all came down to luck; there was nothing they could've done about it. But considering the job Delthasis had given them, it was a real problem.

"So it looks like I'll just...be in charge of guarding some random students, I suppose..."

"Iris and I were put in charge of protecting the target's younger sister, but not the guy himself..."

"What about you, Lena?"

The three of them looked over at Lena, and...her face was pale. She was stricken with despair.

"I'm... I'm guarding the target's brother. Why did it have to turn out like this?! There are so many cute, sweet, younger boys here, and yet... Wh-What am I meant to do now?!"

"Um... Lena, do remember we came here to work as *guards*. I feel like you may be forgetting what we're all here for..."

“Yeah, Lena—don’t forget why we came all the damn way here! We need the money! From *working!*”

“There’s a lot of prey here that Lena could go after, so it’s the perfect storm for her to forget why she’s here, y’know? Remember, she suddenly disappeared halfway through that last job we did too...”

“Ah... That *did* happen, didn’t it?”

Back when they’d gone out to subjugate the wild coccos, Lena had disappeared on the way there.

It was a real problem with her: whenever she saw boys that were her type, going after them automatically became her new top priority.

She found great delight in escorting those young boys—“unripe fruit,” you could say—up the stairs to adulthood.

Zelos was worried some of her victims might come tumbling down those stairs and injure themselves.

“I suppose we don’t have much of a choice. I’ll have Ukei and the others look after Zweit. Even if that *does* feel like a bit of an overkill... Well, they’ll be up against criminals. I guess it’s not really a problem.”

“Couldn’t we say the same thing for you, Mister? You could burn down this whole forest by yourself if you wanted to, right?”

“Anyway, looks like we got a problem on our hands straightaway, huh? Since none of us got put with the guy we gotta protect... You sure we’ll be okay just leaving it to the coccos?”

The plan had just had too many issues with it, right from the start. There’d never been any guarantee that one of them would be assigned to Zweit, and there were only so many people in on the plan. Sure, Zelos had handed out a bevy of items to help, but that alone hadn’t been enough to resolve everything.

“I guess we’ve just gotta try and make sure they don’t go too deep into the forest, huh? Since we might not be able to get there in time to help if they do...”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Pretty sure even the attackers’d avoid places with a lot of people.”

“As long as those attackers are logical enough people to think about that in the first place, that is... There are always going to be exceptions.”

They hadn't even *started* their guard duties yet, and things were already looking iffy.

They'd known this might happen, but actually having it happen for real had suddenly renewed their sense of worry.

The training was to last for four days—and it was going to be starting with a dark air of concern hanging over Zelos and his companions.

Chapter 10: The Old Guy Protects a Group of Boys

Just as Zelos and his group had feared, none of them had been put in charge of protecting Zweit's group.

The group Zelos had been assigned to was all kids he'd never met before—leaving Zweit, the one Duke Delthasis wanted to protect, without any guard who was in on the plan. All Zelos could do now was leave it to his trusty chickens.

The only problem with that was that said chickens—Ukei, Zankei, and Senkei—tended to lose their cool when they got into a fight.

They were scarily eager to seek out strong opponents and fight them, all in an attempt to better themselves. And they wouldn't hold back on fighting anyone, or anything, that stood in their way. They were some violent little birds.

What that meant was, they could easily become so absorbed in some fight or another that they'd forget all about their guard duty...and yet, they were the last hope that Zelos could rely on to protect Zweit. He could only hope that they gave it their best shot—though he was kind of worried about how well they were going to manage.

“Now... How should I word this?”

Generally speaking, wild coccos were aggressive, but weak as far as monsters went.

Ukei and the others were distinct subspecies, to the point of being essentially different monsters altogether, but they *looked* just like your average wild coccos. He couldn't imagine Zweit simply accepting it if Zelos said they would be his guards.

Fortunately, the coccos had already annihilated that pack of bandits, so Zweit knew they were strong. Zelos still wasn't sure that'd be enough for Zweit to rely on them, though. They were monsters, after all.

Sure, they could understand speech, but most people would probably see

them as if they were something like dogs or cats; Zelos couldn't exactly puff out his chest with pride and claim they were the perfect guards. They were *chickens*.

With heavy footsteps, he walked over to talk to Zweit.

"Teach? What is it?"

As Zweit noticed Zelos approaching, he started walking briskly over to meet him halfway.

"Zweit... I've got bad news."

"What—you didn't get put in charge of protecting me? I mean, we thought that'd probably happen, so..."

"I appreciate the understanding. Anyway, instead, uh...I've decided to ask my three birds to keep you safe."

"Oh... Those chicken monsters, huh? Seriously, how'd they get so strong, anyway? They're practically a whole different type of creature at this point..."

"They *are*, actually. One's a grappler cocco, one's a slasher cocco, and the other's a sniper cocco. They've been learning all sorts of different moves lately too. If you let your guard down just because of how they look, you'll be in for a bad time, so watch out."

"Wait, I've never heard anything like that! So they're not just regular subspecies—they're each some kinda weird mutant subspecies?!"

"Yes. But they're *strong*. Strong enough that your average mercenary wouldn't stand a chance against them."

Zweit looked behind Zelos, to the coccos. They were full of motivation...of a rather violent type.

They were already on the hunt for strong opponents.

"Jeez. They sure are pumped up for this, huh?"

"Mm-hmm. In fact, I'd wager they're actually *looking forward* to coming under attack. They're all about getting stronger by fighting against the strongest enemies they can find, after all..."

“Whoa. Sounds like they live and breathe the warrior life, huh? Still, they’re *coccos*... Mmm.”

Sure, Ukei and the other *coccos* were strong.

But going into battle with three little birds waddling along behind you just wasn’t a cool look, however you tried to spin it.

If anything, it was going to give off a very *cozy* feeling, one that’d bring smiles to the faces of any onlookers.

“Hey, Zweit... Are we really gonna go monster hunting alongside a bunch of *coccos*?” asked Diio. “You sure people won’t start laughing at us?”

“Don’t say it... I mean, they’re chickens, but they’re stronger than all of us, that much is for sure.”

“I get that, but, like... It’s just kinda *lame*, y’know? If Celestina sees me walking along with *coccos* tagging behind me...”

“She might say it’s cute. She’d be talking about the *coccos*, mind you.”

“Okay—bring on the *coccos*! Hooray for *coccos*! You think it’d put a smile on her face? Then it’s a done deal!”

Diio had changed his stance remarkably quickly.

He was willing to make enemies of the gods themselves if it helped even the tiniest bit to get her attention.

Men in love could be so reckless.

“Mmm... Zweit? Don’t tell me, is he...”

“Yep. Guy’s been head-over-heels for Celestina for a while now, Teach...”

“Th-That’s, uh...dangerous. Does he have a death wish?”

“I know. But he’s, well...” Zweit grimaced.

“Ah, that’s right. You’ve got some bad memories of something similar yourself... Still, in the worst-case scenario—actually, no, in pretty much *every* scenario—I think he could end up dead from this. There’s no way old Creston doesn’t already know what’s going on.”

“Look, I’ve *tried* to stop the poor guy. Over and over again. Every chance I get. But he’s serious about this. And I just can’t bring myself to ruin my best friend’s dreams...”

Zweit was in a tough position.

As long as Diio pined for Celestina, they could expect Creston—Zweit and Celestina’s grandfather—to stand in his way.

All Zelos and Zweit could picture was the image—and *smell*—of a whole-roasted Diio. And the sight of Celestina shedding tears over her grandfather’s senseless violence.

They could only see this ending one way: badly.

“Anyway, leaving that aside—I’ll be putting Ukei and the others in charge of guarding you, but if you need, you can still use the—”

“I know. Hopefully I never need to use it, but...”

“Yes; there are some idiots out there who are beyond saving. I’m sure they’ll try and pull something while you’re in the forest. Apparently the organization that’s doing this got really smashed up by your father a while back, so I expect they’ve been holding quite the grudge.”

“*Dad?! Seriously, what’s he doing* behind closed doors? Sounds like it’s a pain in the ass for me, whatever it is...”

“Hold it!”

Hearing a sudden voice, Zelos turned around to see two mercenaries glaring at him.

They were in charge of guarding Zweit, by the looks of it. Both were twenty-something-year-old men with a real half-assed vibe.

They hardly looked like they’d be up to the task of guarding the students.

“What do you think you’re doing, ignoring us and putting your own guards on him, huh?!”

“You tryin’ ta say those coccos are gonna be more useful than us, *huh?!?*”

“Honestly? Yes. You’ve hit the nail on the head. My three little birds here are

much stronger than the two of you.”

“So you’re just gonna say it now, are you?! You bastard!”

But it was the truth. You couldn’t blame him for admitting it.

“Don’t fuck with us! No way some weak old fart’s *birds* are strong!”

“Oh, but strong they are! In fact, they’ve been impressing me more and more lately. And they’ve been itching to butt heads with some other monsters for a challenge.”

“They’re *coccos*, dude! The weakest monsters ya can get! Stop bullshittin’ us! You *tryin’* ta start somethin’ here?!”

“Uh... Not a good idea, guys. Don’t pick a fight with him. It won’t go well for you.”

“Shut up, rich kid! Just sit back and let us protect you!”

As the mercenaries got rougher and rougher with their attitudes, they were being watched by a certain three pairs of eyes. And then...

ZOOM! SHHHRK! SPLAT!

It was over in an instant.

The mercenaries were left kissing the ground, prostrate before the *coccos’* feet.

“Hard to say whether the *coccos* are too strong or those mercenaries were just too weak, huh...”

“It’s *both*, isn’t it? Pretty pathetic of them to end up like that, with how tough they were trying to look.”

“Wh-What the *fuck* are those things...? Those ain’t no *coccos*!”

“They’re... They’re fuckin’ *terrifying*...”

“I’d recommend not insulting them, okay? They can understand human speech, so if you do anything stupid, you might end up *disappearing* all of a sudden. You get me?”

The mercenary pair’s faces paled before Zelos’s eyes. They wouldn’t be going

against Ukei and the other coccos again.

For mercenaries and monsters alike, this was a world where strength was everything. And these mercenaries with their inflated egos had just learned that very personally.

“Well, it’s about time. I should get going. Ukei, Zankei, Senkei—I’m leaving the rest to you, okay? Just make sure you don’t get *too* caught up in fighting...”

“Bokah!” (“Your word is our command, Leader!”)

“So who are you gonna be guarding, Teach?”

“A bunch of boys in a lower year level. I suppose I should be thankful that *she* wasn’t the one put in charge of them... Anyway, Zweit, just watch out, okay?”

“Got it. Anyway, I trust you guys. More than a thousand soldiers.”

“Come on—don’t praise me *too* much. You’re putting a lot of pressure on me here...”

There wasn’t much meaning in Zelos having come all the way here to protect Zweit now that he’d been put with a different group.

Still, he was taking part as a *mercenary*, so he had to follow the decisions of the mercenaries’ guild.

Iris and the others had at least been put with *someone* Duke Delthasis wanted to protect, even if it wasn’t the main target. But Zelos hadn’t had the luck of the draw. He’d been put with students he had nothing to do with; it was a little unfortunate.

Still, it was what it was. He headed off to join his group of random students.

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After a long speech from their teachers, the students from the Istol Academy of Magic were finally about to begin their combat training in the Ramaf Woods.

Home to a great many monsters, the forest was often used as a place for mercenaries and knights to experience real combat.

The monsters here weren’t as strong as in some other places, but it was still ruled by survival of the fittest, and you’d still be in danger if you let your guard

down. Last year's combat training camp had been held somewhere else, and the students had only managed to hunt a few small monsters; it hadn't given them much fighting practice. The Ramaf Woods, in contrast, had so many monsters that even mercenaries came here all the time to hunt. There were enough dangers lurking between the trees that carelessness could leave you dead, but it was also the perfect place for occasionally making big discoveries that would leave society reeling.

Defeating the monsters here could get you high-quality magic stones, or materials fit for making excellent weapons and armor. And unlike in some other areas, *big* monsters lived here too, so it was a profitable spot for mercenaries.

Frankly, *that* was why most of the mercenaries were here; the bulk of them didn't give a damn about guarding the students. If the groups got into any real danger, they'd probably be perfectly happy abandoning the students in the name of keeping *themselves* safe.

Not that they'd told the students that, of course.

Speaking of mercenaries, Zelos had been paired with another man he didn't know to guard his group of students. Both of them had been staring silently at each other for a while now, apparently not sure how to start the conversation. Then, finally:

"I'm Zelos."

A pause. Then: "Larsus."

More silence. More staring. Neither man knew how to treat the other.

"Stop it. The sight of you two gazing into each other's eyes like that gives me the willies. Come, now. I doubt I'll be able to rely on mercenaries who don't know the first thing about magic, but do try not to slow me down, at least."

Silence.

"Did you not *hear* me, you common brutes?"

Silence.

"*Listen* to me!"

One of the students in the group Zelos was guarding was of noble birth.

He was probably about a year younger than Celestina. His equipment—all too extravagant for its own good—stood out like a sore thumb among the rest of the group, only reinforcing the image that he was a spoiled little boy who’d been coddled enough to make him arrogant.

By the looks of him, he wasn’t all that talented, and his haughty attitude simply came from his arrogance, so Zelos and Larsus were paying him no heed.

“You are to listen to me when I speak! Or are you trying to make a fool of me, you cretins?!”

Larsus sighed. “Look. I don’t care about what some little brat has to say. Got it?”

Zelos followed up: “I get the feeling you don’t know anything except magic. Do you really think it’s all going to be smooth sailing out here for someone like you? Honestly, I doubt you’d be able to fight off a *goblin*. Now, maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you *do* have some experience on the battlefield! But if you don’t, I’d prefer you stayed quiet unless you’ve got something *important* to say.”

“D-Do you know who I am?!”

Both of the men responded together: “No idea.”

Their reply only further infuriated the noble boy. He was trying his best not to explode, though, taking deep breaths to calm his raging heart.

Once he’d managed to do that, he swept back his hair with a pompous, affected gesture, gazed at them dramatically, and spoke:

“Fine. Let me tell you who I am. I am the oldest son of Earl Onmahed; my name is Lavuerin Pantiz Onmahed. So, what do you say to that? Do you understand who you’re speaking to now? Did that strike some fear into you?”

“PFFT!”

Zelos and Larsus couldn’t help but guffaw.

The kid’s name wasn’t just silly; it was *terrible*.

What was that? “Loves wearing...”?

“Love wearing panties on my head”? That’s, uh, quite the name...

While neither was *saying* anything about it, both Larsus and Zelos were thinking some pretty rude things about poor Lavuerin's name.

"Y-You're not... You're not *joking*, are you?"

"What are you talking about? Don't tell me you two cretins are having insolent thoughts about my name!"

So he was telling the truth, huh...?

Their insults had only been in their minds, but it seemed like the kid had a sharp sense for that kind of thing.

Lavuerin's face grew redder and redder with rage. At this rate, it seemed like he might start firing off magic at them. He probably got this kind of reaction all the time.

"Well, let's get going, shall we? We *are* here to help these kids with their training, after all."

"Yeah. Better than staying here chatting with that little boy."

"D-Did you just call me 'little boy'?! I will have you know, I am—"

But Zelos and Larsus were already walking into the forest now, paying no heed to Lavuerin.

Being ignored was the cherry on top; Lavuerin's temper had just about gone critical. But with the other students walking off alongside the guards now, he couldn't just let himself be left behind. He strode along to catch up with them.

"Remember this moment. I *will* get my vengeance for your insolent behavior."

"L-Lavuerin... I don't think that's a good idea. Those two don't look like your average guys..."

"That's *Sir* Lavuerin to you! And my father's influence will permit me to do whatever I want to these poor excuses for mercenaries!"

"So you're just a little kid relying on daddy's authority, eh? If you're frustrated, prove me wrong. Show me you're strong enough to survive on your own. When it comes down to it, this world's all about survival of the fittest."

"You! Mercenary in the black! Silence! When my father finds out about this,

he—”

“He won’t be able to do a thing to me, I expect. I’ve got friends in high positions myself. If anything, I think your father’s the one who’d be in danger... I might not do anything to him, but I can’t speak for *them*. They do seem like the sort to get up to all sorts of shady antics behind closed doors...”

The Solistia ducal house had no ill intentions for Zelos, but it did seem like they were trying to use him for their own purposes. Of course, they did so by offering him fair deals, with suitable payment and conditions.

Duke Delthasis in particular made no effort to hide such intentions. In fact, he was entirely open about them, making it clear that his dealings were meant to be profitable for both parties. He was a shrewd individual.

For Zelos, meanwhile, it was nice to have connections. He was happy with their mutual understanding: each side provided value to the other without encroaching on their other affairs. Job offers and the like would only be brought up when necessary, and that was it.

Though, well, the real “value” that interested Zelos was access to Solistia Trading. He wasn’t all that interested in things like the influence of a ducal house.

“Your *friends*? You think your friends would be outside my father’s reach?! If you truly believe they are, then tell me—just who are these friends of yours?”

“Why do I have to tell you that? You’re just an immature kid without any power. You should probably think about your position a bit before trying to make demands.”

“Silence! I’m a noble!”

“So what? Okay, so you were born as a noble—but you as an individual don’t actually have any duties or authority, do you? So I really don’t see why I need to tell you anything. Here’s some advice: *think* a little more before you speak. If you don’t...it’ll get you killed one day.”

Lavuerin flinched.

He’d felt an ice-cold cruelty behind the final words of Zelos’s retort.

The boy had a good intuition, if nothing else. A cold sweat started to run down his back. It was the first time he'd ever had that sort of malice directed toward him.

"Mm... You sure you didn't go too far with that?"

"Looks like he has a sharp intuition. That's a good start. But if he doesn't change his attitude a bit, he'll die out here. It's important to be careful—especially when you're in a place teeming with monsters."

"You're not wrong. Don't know if it'll go that smoothly, though."

"That's fine. If he's able to pick up on me directing bloodlust toward him, then that's already something. I just don't want to see any kids die out here—even if it's their own stupidity that gets them killed."

Larsus had nothing to say in return. He felt the same way as Zelos, after all.

The party consisted of eight people in total, including the two guards. The students made their way farther into the forest slowly, cautiously; they had no experience with hunting, after all. Leading the group was Lavuerin, but it wasn't as if he had any particular goal or idea in mind; he was just ambling along in a straight line.

Occasionally, the group would hear what sounded like a magic explosion or a sword fight in the distance. But for some reason, they weren't running into any monsters themselves.

They were just walking, and walking some more.

"Damn it! There's not a single monster here!"

"Yeah... This isn't going to be much of a training camp at this rate."

"I need the credits. If I don't manage to at least take out an orc or something..."

"*What's* your level again? No way you'd suddenly be able to beat something that strong."

The longer the students went without encountering any monsters, the more their guards began to drop.

And of course, that was when something finally appeared.

“Looks like we’ve finally got some monsters here for you all! Not orcs, though. They’re ogres.”

All of the students responded at once: “*Ogres?! We can’t fight ogres!*”

“*Lesser ogres, specifically,*” Larsus said. “Looks like you’ve hit the jackpot on your first encounter.”

“They’re strong, but they’re slow. I’d say the six of you should...just be able to scrape a win against one of them?”

Lesser ogres were smaller than regular ogres, but they were still stronger than orcs or goblins. Students would inevitably have a hard time against them.

Their limbs bulged with muscle; they were largely humanoid in shape, but probably more like primates than anything else. They were more strong than fast, and they were tougher than orcs. Their skin was resilient—strong enough that a spell from an inexperienced mage wouldn’t leave a single scratch—and they were considered a good target for mercenaries and the like, as defeating them could get you materials to make useful gear.

Of course, regular ogres had more valuable skin than lesser ogres—theirs was worth about five times as much, in fact—and their innards were a valuable ingredient in medicine.

The innards of lesser ogres could be used the same way, albeit with inferior effects. But they were still precious materials to alchemists who made magic potions.

“Aren’t you going to kill them? You’ve been waiting for some monsters to show up, right?”

“As if we’d try to start a fight with *those!* They’re *ogres!*”

“W-We gotta run...”

“We’re never beating those!”

The boys all had tears in their eyes. Zelos sighed and turned back to look at the lesser ogres.

“Three of them. Can I leave one to you?”

“Mm. What about the other two?”

“I’ll kill them myself. Now, then, let’s get to work...”

Zelos drew the combat knives at his waist as a bold grin came to his face.

Larsus drew his battle-axe and started running toward the lesser ogres.

GRAAAAAAH!

“Hup!”

A lesser ogre raised its club overhead and brought it down with all of its might onto Larsus, who was closing in.

Larsus caught the blow with his battle-axe, pushed back the lesser ogre as he deflected the club with sheer force, and used the brief gap that gave him to take a fierce swing with his battle-axe.

His ability to wield such a heavy weapon as if it weighed nothing was impressive enough—but even more impressive was his technique. He’d wasted no time landing a pinpoint strike to the monster’s vitals.

Larsus might not have been a Great Sage, but he was no slouch.

Zelos, meanwhile, ran toward another of the lesser ogres. He slipped past it like the wind before savaging the carotid arteries in its neck with a flurry of blades, and just like that, it was dead.

The third lesser ogre went to swing its club down on Zelos’s head. But right before the hit connected, Zelos’s outline seemed to blur—and all of a sudden, he was no longer there. He’d gotten behind the creature’s back at some point, and thrust a combat knife into each side of its neck.

He leaped back just in time to take cover as blood came bursting out from the wounds, dyeing the forest red.

“Wh-Whoa...”

“Those two are... They’re amazing! So cool!”

“Um, Lavuerin... It looks like you were picking a fight with some pretty incredible people.”

“Hold on! This doesn’t make sense! That surly mercenary’s strength is weird enough... But the one in black is a *mage*, isn’t he?! Why didn’t he use any magic?!”

The other five students yelled at him in unison: “Because he’s so strong he didn’t *need* to!”

Sometimes, a person’s life could change in an instant. The way the two mercenaries had taken out the lesser ogres so quickly, all while making it seem effortless, had lit a flame in the boys. In mere moments, they’d all been captivated, instilled with the burning desire to get stronger. One day, they might even be as powerful as Zelos and Larsus themselves.

The two men, however, paid no heed to the captivated boys as they began taking apart the bodies of their defeated foes. They were setting aside any useful materials—one of the basic skills of any mercenary.

“The skin and the innards are just about all you can use from these things, aren’t they...?”

“Yeah,” Larsus replied. “Their meat’s no good.”

“What do you say we leave it here and go hunting for some goblins or something, then? We *are* here to help these boys with their combat training, after all.”

“Mmm... Sounds fair. Where do we go?”

“We can do it right here, can’t we? I’m sure some hungry goblins or forest wolves or something should pop out if we just hide for a bit. That should be a good opportunity for these low-level boys to get some experience.”

“Right. Let’s do that, then.”

Zelos and Larsus gathered up the lesser ogre meat—not edible by humans, but a perfect meal for monsters—and left it all sitting there in a pile. Once that was done, Zelos used his Gaia Control spell to gather up earth and build a pillbox in an open space nearby.

Finally, he neatly covered the pillbox with grass to camouflage it. Now they’d

be able to hide inside without any monsters knowing they were there.

The plan was for the boys to fire off attacks while they were hiding inside the pillbox, allowing them to level up in safety. They were mages, after all; it wasn't as if they'd suddenly be capable of melee combat. This was the safest strategy.

"Whoa! He used magic to make a hiding spot!"

"I didn't know you *could* use magic for that kind of thing. I mean, our teachers never told us about it..."

"He's gotta be a pretty amazing mage, then, right?"

"Grrr..."

All of the boys—well, all of them bar one—were impressed with Zelos's use of magic.

The academy really only taught them how to use earth magic for fighting. There had been nothing about using it to build fortifications like this, at least. After all, if you used magic to create a mud wall, the spell typically used mana to gather the dust from out of the air and bind it together. So when the mana inevitably dissipated after a short while, the wall would lose its shape and just scatter back into dust.

It was commonly accepted by modern mages, then, that you couldn't use magic to build defensive structures or anything of the sort.

The magic Zelos had cast, however, used dirt from the ground and compacted it with physical pressure, so even when the mana dissipated, the structure stayed intact. The students had never seen anything like it.

His spell had manipulated the earth while using very little mana, and it had created a structure that wouldn't just fade into dust when that mana dissipated, making it usable for a long time. Shocked by what they'd seen, the students started chatting among each other, trying to figure out what kind of magic it was.

"Why doesn't it collapse? He made it with magic, didn't he? Usually it'd all break apart when the mana dissipated!"

"A spell like that should use a lot of mana too, right? I get that he probably

has more mana than we do since he's an adult, but would he really have enough to keep something like this together? He doesn't even seem tired either... How does it work?"

"Maybe he improved the magic formula? I heard that's really hard to do, though. Even our teachers struggle with it. So if he did that, he's gotta be pretty amazing, right?"

Lavuerin just kept gnashing his teeth. "I will not—will *not* accept this man!"

He was still refusing to acknowledge Zelos's talent.

"Well then, hide in here and wait for some monsters to come along. I'm guessing none of you wants to fight up close and personal anyway, am I right? This way, we can kill two birds with one stone—rest to save your stamina, and wait to ambush some monsters."

"I'm the leader here! Do as I tell you to do!"

"You know, I don't think it's really proper for a noble to just force his own plans on everyone without consulting them. If you ignore everyone else and push ahead with what you want to do, you're in for a rough lesson, okay? You might usually live somewhere nice and safe, but that's not where you are right now. You need to understand that. If you don't, you'll end up like *them*..."

Puffing on a cigarette, Zelos pointed over to the corpses of the lesser ogres, which by now were having their flesh pecked at by omnivorous birds. This world was a cruel one, one where only the victors could eat, and the losers became their meals.

The boys' faces were starting to grow pale. They were probably picturing their own bodies being picked at for carrion.

But once again, there was one particular boy who refused to listen to advice.

"Don't lump me together with these fools! I am a gifted student, and I have been receiving tailored education from a talented tutor! I would never die to the likes of some monster!"

"If you think you're stronger than you are, you'll die out there," Larsus said. "If you *wanna* die, fine. Be my guest. But die by yourself."

“I’d love to know where he gets all that confidence from... He might’ve had a tutor teach him a few things, but that’s only good enough to give him a vague starting point. If he keeps underestimating nature, he’ll be the first one to die. He really *will* lose his life out here if he doesn’t learn to throw away that silly pride of his.”

“That really a problem? I’d prefer we didn’t have anyone holding us back.”

“I suppose if he *does* die, we can just report that ‘he absolutely refused to listen to our advice and insisted on going off by himself.’ We could probably also add, ‘How did his parents even raise him?’ That might help. At any rate, it won’t be *our* fault.”

In other words, Zelos wouldn’t be willing to take the blame if one of his students ignored all his advice and died as a result.

The mercenaries had been hired to protect the students, but they couldn’t be held responsible if a student died from doing something stupid of their own volition. If Lavuerin’s recklessness got him killed, it’d be entirely his own fault—not that of the academy, or the mercenaries, or the mercenaries’ guild.

“Do you get it? We’re here to guard you, but we won’t be able to keep you alive if you charge off all by yourself. Besides, aren’t nobles supposed to think before they act? Any one thing you do can cause a lot of people to lose their lives. Do you really think your own life is worth that much more than theirs?”

“Of course I do! I’m a *noble*! It should go without saying that my life is far more valuable than the lives of some common— *Eep!*”

Lavuerin broke off, overwhelmed by the looks of sheer contempt from every other person present.

“Well, *someone’s* got a high opinion of himself... Out here, though, words like ‘noble’ don’t mean anything. Only one thing matters: do you live, or do you die? All of you would do well to remember that if someone’s endangering the rest of the group, abandoning them is a real option.”

“A-Are you saying you intend to abandon me?!”

“I’m just saying that we will if you *force* us to. It’s all up to you, really. Just be aware that there *is* the possibility you get left behind. And that goes doubly so

on the battlefield.”

In a real battle, uncooperative members of a group would be left behind without a second thought.

Treating the rest of your group like dirt would only earn you their animosity, and that went doubly so in combat. On occasion, it’d even get you killed by a knife in the back from your own companions.

If a skilled fighter with a long list of battles behind them was acting that way, it was one thing; but when that arrogance was coming from a complete greenhorn, they were nothing but a hindrance. Of *course* there was a real chance of them getting abandoned in an emergency.

“Ngh...”

“Mr. Zelos. They’re here.”

“Oh? So they are. Goblins, eh? Okay, everyone—get ready.”

“Yes!”

Goblins were omnivores. They ate whatever they could get their hands on, sate their hunger, and then set out after their next prey.

They were weak alone, but they were numerous, and highly reproductive. Or at least, that was the case in this forest; their strength could actually differ by a huge margin depending on where you were. In the Far-Flung Green Depths, there were plenty of goblins that operated like proper militaries, and in some parts, there were even goblins able to take down flying dragons. They could be a real threat.

“I-I’ve never fought a monster before...”

“Me too. Well, I’ve been part of a group all firing on a single goblin at the academy, but this is my first time actually hunting anything...”

“But goblins, uh... They don’t drop any useful materials, right?”

“Aha ha ha... Indeed! Defeating a goblin won’t get you anything to boast about. Which is why we need to aim for *larger* prey, and—”

“Jeez. Kid’s crazy.”

“It’s one thing if your overconfidence gets *you* killed, but I’m not sure I can approve of you dragging your teammates into it too, Lavuerin. Besides, even monsters of the same level can be much stronger or weaker depending on their species. It sounds like you’re very eager to get eaten by a big monster, though. Oh—are you suicidal, by any chance?”

Lavuerin had made a bold claim, but he was only a smidgen stronger than the other students he was with. He wasn’t that much better than them.

The only difference was that he’d bought spell scrolls that let him use stronger spells than his classmates—and even then, the higher firepower of those spells just meant that they used up his mana all the faster. In the worst-case scenario, it was entirely possible that he’d use a spell that was beyond him, run out of mana and collapse, with the spell having had no real effect but to draw all of the monsters’ attention to him.

A mage’s true worth was in how they mastered their spells; the firepower of their spell repertoire, or lack thereof, was of secondary importance. Whatever magic you had, the key was to fully devote yourself to learning the skills and knowledge that would let you master it.

“Four of them, eh? That’s perfect. All right, then—*Intelligence Boost*.”

Intelligence Boost was a buff spell that temporarily improved the potency of the target’s magic. It tacked extra mana onto any spell the target activated, potentially giving a real boost to the power of those spells—though the buff only remained active until the mana provided ran out.

Supplementing a mage’s spells with Intelligence Boost would just about double their firepower. Or at least, that was the usual benchmark. Things were different when *Zelos* was the one casting the buff; he’d supplied an insane amount of mana, and so the power of the buffed spells would be equally insane. Or, in other words...

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

Even the weakest little spell would be transformed into something terrifying.

One of the boys had simply fired off a regular old Fireball. But that one spell engulfed two goblins in flame from head to toe, reducing them to disfigured

corpses in a matter of moments.

This was similar to what Zelos had done for Celestina shortly after first meeting her. Intelligence Boost wasn't as strong as the buff he'd cast on her back then...but still, it was enough to leave the students astonished.

"Huh?!"

The boy who'd fired the spell was left speechless at the firepower of his own magic.

"No time to be surprised! The remaining goblins have noticed they have company. They'll probably be coming over here to attack you before long. So you'll probably want to deal with them before they get here! While the buff's still active."

"A-All right! Frozen fragments, strike my foe... Ice Bullet!"

"M-Me too, then... Um... Stone fragments, pierce my foe... Stone Bullet!"

"I'll go with... Raging winds, sunder my foe. Air Cutter!"

The boys fired off basic attack spells from within the pillbox. Their spells, made far more powerful by Zelos's buff, annihilated the approaching goblins one after another.

More and more goblins fell to the ground. But reinforcements were flooding in from the forest, bolstering their numbers.

There was no time to relax. The students continued their spell incantations.

"Wait! If that support magic of yours is able to make basic spells that powerful, then why haven't you cast it on *me*?!"

"I'm guessing you can use at least intermediate magic, right? Have you even thought about what kind of collateral damage you'd deal if you cast that with this sort of buff? Look at how powerful their *beginner* magic is!"

"Ngh..."

"Besides: as a mage, you have to be very familiar with the effects of your own magic, and be able to choose what spell you're going to use in an instant. And intermediate magic uses longer incantations, so it's slower to activate than

beginner magic. The goblins would get all the way here before you finished casting the spell! As a mage, you should be dispatching your enemies as soon as you can.”

Right from the outset, Lavuerin’s aim had been to use stronger magic than his teammates so he could brag about it. But this mage in black robes had ruined his plans, and even forced him to sit back and watch the formidable effect of just a commonplace buff spell.

Lavuerin had received an education for gifted children, yes, but he’d learned entirely the wrong things from it. He was hating this black-robed mage more with every passing moment.

“One’s getting away.”

“And it’d be a pain if it notified all its allies, I suppose... *Fire.*”

Zelos’s lazy cast of the Fire spell left the goblin engulfed in flames where it stood, turning it into charcoal in a matter of moments. Seeing such a shocking scene play out before their eyes left the boys speechless.

The Fire spell was beginner magic; it was nowhere near powerful enough to do *that*. Only a ridiculously high-level mage could make it that strong.

“Well, that’s all of them. Let’s wait until everyone’s got their mana back now.”

“Pretty easy job.”

“Would you like me to prepare you some tea? I’ve brought along everything I need.”

“Hmm... Yeah. Thanks.”

Right next to the group of students, who were all still dumbfounded, Zelos started preparing tea by boiling water in a pot he’d brought along. He was incredibly nonchalant about what had just happened.

And so, for these students, the Istol Academy of Magic’s combat training camp started with sheer amazement.

Chapter 11: The Old Guy Has a Relapse to “Back Then”

As Zelos was guarding the boys, Celestina’s group was heading into the forest with Iris and Jeanne.

Putting Celestina aside for a moment, the group’s main aim was to help Ulna and Carosty level up. Iris and Jeanne, meanwhile, were keeping watchful eyes on their surroundings.

The problem was, the group wasn’t very well-balanced. It consisted of three mages, as well as two melee fighters—a beastfolk and a swordswoman—without a single healer.

“Is it just me,” Jeanne asked, “or has this group got kinda terrible balance? We only have two people at the front, and one of ’em’s low-level...”

“Yeah,” Iris agreed. “It’s nice we’re all girls, so we can all be open with each other, but...we’re probably kinda iffy in a fight?”

Carosty huffed. “How rude! We may not look it, but the two of us have outstanding grades at the academy, I’ll have you know!”

“Your grades don’t do much for you in a fight, though, do they? I can’t exactly talk crap about anyone else’s level, but I can at least say Iris is the strongest one here. But when it comes to finding monsters in the first place, we’ve gotta rely on, uh... Ulna? Was that your name? Anyway, yeah, without her, we won’t be able to find anything.”

“I can use magic to find monsters, but there’s a chance it ends up taking us to some crazy strong monster... And if that happens, *we’ll* be the ones in trouble! I mean, Mister’d be able to one-shot it, of course, but...”

Celestina wasn’t exactly fond of Iris, who’d just casually brought up Zelos in the conversation.

It wasn’t as if she *hated* Iris. Not by any means. It was just that whenever Iris

talked about Zelos, Celestina got a glimpse of sides of her teacher she'd never seen before—and it made her a bit jealous, that was all...

“Is that mage you're talking about really so impressive? He hardly seemed it, to me.”

“Oh, yeah, he's *strong*! He's one of the five Destroyers. I used to really look up to one of them too! Not Mister, though.”

“Th-That's *quite* the barbaric nickname to give somebody... Whatever did they do to get a moniker such as that?”

“Let's see. Uh, they annihilated a whole bunch of orcs that were breeding out of control, including the orc king... They thrashed a really strong dragon, one in the dragon king tier, with just the five of them... They went after a behemoth—oh, and that ended with a city getting attacked. The whole place went up in flames... They had a bunch of assassins come after them to try and make a name for themselves, and they massacred every last one... And there's plenty more where that came from! Even just from what I remember off the top of my head.”

“He sounds thoroughly *dangerous*! I daresay he is a disgrace to all mages!”

To Carosty, who admired the Sages of legend, the deeds of these Destroyers were something she simply couldn't overlook.

Though of course, she wasn't aware that everything Iris had just said were things they'd done in a video game.

And so a girl like Carosty, who held strong ideals about what it meant to be a mage, inevitably found it hard to accept what she saw as reality—a reality that went entirely against her beliefs.

“Why would you look up to such a savage man? I simply cannot believe it!”

“I...guess it's because he develops his own magic, and he's kind to weak adven—I mean, mercenaries, and he makes all these magic tools and amazing potions that nobody's ever seen before. Okay, so a few people got hurt by his research, but I think it's cool how he just kept adventuring in whatever way *he* thought was fun, regardless of what anyone else said.”

“You are only making him sound *more* self-centered! From what you are saying, this man is a criminal who does whatever he wants! Someone who cares not in the slightest for whatever trouble he may cause other people!”

“What’s so bad about that? Or, like... I’d say it’s more that he’s just free-spirited. He doesn’t let other people’s ideas of common sense define his life. I mean, the mages in this country are super selfish too, right? I’ve seen them going around town acting all arrogant and complaining to people about everything they can think of, just because they wanna feel powerful!”

“Ngh...”

“Besides, at least Mister and the other Destroyers were nice to weak people! Though they did, uh, destroy anyone they didn’t like...”

“Uh, Iris? I’m not sure that’s helping.”

Jeanne made a good point there.

The deeds of Zelos and the other Destroyers sounded very different depending on whether you thought they were from reality or a video game...but whatever the case, the group had stood out in a bad way, becoming infamous for causing havoc at every opportunity just because they found it fun.

Still, they’d been acting in line with their own unique principles, and it wasn’t like *everyone* had had a problem with them.

“These stories had never reached *our* country before, but... It sounds like Master was quite the famous person! He must be really something...”

“He was kinda notorious, but I just think he and the others were really cool for all following their own paths, y’know? Even if I did get caught up in one of their fights in a desert city that one time...”

“U-Um... I think I might have heard about this from my brother. Are you talking about that thing where they all...started fighting among themselves and firing off magic everywhere, and...”

“Yeah! It was amazing! There were all these death scorpions covering the desert, and they blew them all up in an instant. But, like, that turned into a fight between the Destroyers, and a bunch of people got caught up in it. In the end,

they kinda just exploded everything—even the pharaoh scorpion! And that thing’s calamity tier!”

“Jeez... I’m amazed the geezer’s still alive after all that. How did he not die?”

“Is that...really something to look up to? It sounds like it was super dangerous, right? And you’re saying it like they just forgot about the monsters and started fighting each other, right?”

The others all nodded. Ulna made a very good point.

“Aww... Don’t you get it~? They don’t let anything hold them back! That’s what makes them so cool! And I like how they’re all kindhearted to the weak, but merciless to their enemies, and how they just do whatever they want, and...”

“I mean...yeah. You’ve gotta respect strength. I kinda get it, y’know?”

You might have gotten the wild girl agreeing with you, but it still sounds like they were being a bother to everyone...

It hadn’t taken much for Iris to get Ulna on board. But Jeanne and Carosty—a regular mercenary and a noble, respectively—were far from convinced.

Celestina was kind of on the fence. She couldn’t commend her teacher for seeking out fight after fight and firing off flashy spells with abandon, but at the same time, she wasn’t going to deny his talent.

Should she take a normal, ethical perspective, or side with Zelos’s absurd way of life? That was the question.

“Oh! I can smell an animal over here!”

“So finally they appear, hmm? Let us take the opportunity to increase our levels. Celestina, Iris, please wait on standby. Ulna and I shall take them on!”

“Ooh... You’re eager to go, huh, Carosty? Looks like your hands are shaking, though—you sure you’re okay?”

“I-I am perfectly fine! I am simply trembling from my excitement to do battle!”

While Carosty’s hands were shaking as she prepared to go into her first-ever

fight, Ulna seemed entirely unfazed. She was just poking fun at Carosty with her usual laid-back tone.

A noise came from the bushes farther into the forest. It was clear there was some kind of monster there.

Iris, Jeanne, and Celestina readied their weapons, just in case. But the monster that emerged from the scrub was...not what they expected.

“Wh-Wha— I cannot believe it...”

“Uh... Seriously? You’re gonna attack *that*?”

“Mmm... Honestly, yeah, it feels kinda wrong...”

“I-It’s so cute...”

The monster they’d encountered was a fluffy, white, two-meter-long...giant rabbit.

“That looks *tasty*...”

“*What?!*”

Ulna had a different take—earning her a unanimous response of shock from the other four. To her, the huge rabbit looked like a pretty tasty hunk of meat.

“U-Ulna? Surely you do not intend to *eat* this rabbit?”

“Huh? Rabbit meat’s tasty, y’know?”

“I mean...” Jeanne hesitated. “Yeah, it’s tasty, but do you seriously think you can bring yourself to kill that thing? There’s no way, right?!”

“Well... This is just how beastfolk are, y’know? They do tend to just decide things based on their instincts...” Iris shrugged.

Between the monster being a giant rabbit and Ulna’s response to seeing it, all of the tension that had built up among the group had faded away into nothing. And you could hardly blame them for it. It was so fluffy, and it had those big, round eyes; it was just so *adorable*! How could they bring themselves to try and kill it?

But, well...that was only how it *looked*.

The rabbit started hopping up and down. Ulna aside, the group was so entranced by how cute it looked that they had warm smiles come to their faces. They were charmed—providing a potentially fatal opening.

Ulna was the only one who noticed the danger in time.

“Uh, I think this rabbit’s...dangerous.”

“Huh?!”

Immediately after that exchange, the giant rabbit started to spin, barreling its way toward Celestina and the others at an intense speed. It was an attack intended to kill—by running the monster’s targets over with sheer momentum, specifically—and the group just barely managed to dodge. For a moment, the four of them were shocked.

The rabbit slammed into a huge tree, which shook violently from the impact.

CRACK... CRACRACRACRACK... FWOOOOOOSH... THUMP!

With a loud noise, the tree fell over, coming down toward Celestina and the others.

All of them hurried to get out of the way.

“I-I remember now! This is a *crusher rabbit*!”

Iris had managed to recall what this rabbit in front of them was.

The crusher rabbit was a fiendish thing, with all sorts of different skills that let it destroy weapons. It was ferocious too, with a tendency to attack any prey as soon as it laid eyes on it.

While it was largely omnivorous, it had a preference for meat. It really was a savage monster—its true nature a far cry from how cute it looked.

It had the Gluttony skill too, letting it devour anything it could get into its mouth—whether it was steel or orichalcum. In short, it ate whatever it could get.

“I-Is that what they call the...‘cute devil’? Why, I have never seen one before!”

“I know it *looks* cute, but it’s anything but! I mean, that Gluttony skill it has lets it eat anything, and it’s *vicious*!”

“Say that earlier, dammit! How do you forget something like that?!”

“C’mon—it was just a rumor I heard! I’ve never actually fought one before! Ahh, fine—*Pitfall*.”

Pitfall was an earth spell that, as the name implied, created a pitfall trap.

But as the crusher rabbit rolled its way toward the group in a second attempt to crush them, it deftly avoided the hole and continued barreling toward them.

“Move!”

“*Aaah!*”

“Ohh... That’s right,” said Iris. “These things are supposed to be about as strong as fire grizzlies, aren’t they? These have better defense, though.”

“P-Please tell us that sort of thing earlier, Iris! Do they have any weaknesses?!”

“Uh... I think they have good ears, so they should be weak against loud noises?”

“Loud noises? All right. Everyone, please cover your ears... *Sound Bomb!*”

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The sound of a tremendous explosion echoed throughout the forest.

Sound Bomb was an air spell that didn’t have any offensive power, but generated a noise loud enough to make you want to cover your ears. It didn’t really do anything *apart* from making the noise, but it was particularly effective against monsters with excellent hearing; sometimes, it could even make them faint.

As Iris had expected, the crusher rabbit was left reeling. And the group wasn’t about to let this chance get away.

“All right—here we go! *Shadow Bind!*”

The Shadow Bind spell Iris was using was a dark spell. It manipulated shadows, using them to bind the target, though its drawback was that it didn’t last for long.

It had an immediate effect, though, binding your target as soon as you cast

the spell. So it was perfect if you just wanted to restrain a monster for a short period of time.

“Now that I have the chance... *Spear of ice, pierce through those who would stand in my way! Ice Lance!*”

“My time to shine~! ♪ *Bestialization!*”

Carosty fired off a lance made of ice, while Ulna used her mana to reinforce her body and press in on the enemy.

Ulna’s combat skills were focused on melee combat. She had talon-like blades fitted to her gauntlets—making them what you could call claw weapons—and she used them to slash at her foes, hard.

“Let’s give you a little extra... *Power Boost! Wind Enchant! Intelligence Boost!*”

Ulna was tearing away at the monster without respite, but her Bestialization used a lot of mana; she wouldn’t be able to keep it up for long. While she was at it, Iris cast support magic to boost Ulna’s offense, helping her deal more damage.



Wind Enchant covered weapons or armor with wind magic, bolstering their offensive and defensive capabilities.

Carosty's spell had its firepower boosted too, allowing it to pierce the thick flesh of the crusher rabbit and dealing further damage through the frostbite it applied as a side effect.

SQUEEEEEEE!

The crusher rabbit howled—or squeaked, rather.

As it did, its white fur stood on end, and it broke free from Iris's binding magic.

"Oh, no! Ulna, run!"

"Crap... She's out of mana?!"

Bestialization came naturally to beastfolk, but it used up a lot of mana. And it seemed like Ulna was running out, slowing her movements.

The crusher rabbit sent a paw with sharp claws swinging down toward her.

"Like hell you do! *Grah— Hwah?!'*"

"Wahhh—!"

Jeanne had leaped in the way of the attack just in time, taking the blow with her sword...but she hadn't been able to stop her momentum. She'd collided with Ulna at high speed, sending the two of them flying. Iris wasted no time covering for them:

"Stun Bullet!"

SKEEEEEEEEEW?!

Iris's Stun Bullet—a lightning-based spell—coursed through the charger rabbit, leaving it paralyzed.

It bought Carosty a moment to chant an incantation. She cast the most powerful spell in her arsenal:

"O raging torrent of wind and ice. Shred those who oppose me, that they may sleep in frost for eternity... Ice Storm!"

With the buff from Iris's support magic, Carosty's spell was on par with Ice Blizzard, the more advanced version of the spell she'd just cast. The crusher rabbit's body was torn by blades of frigid air and encased in ice.

"Did we get it?"

"Jeanne! Don't jinx us like that!"

And it looked like that comment was on the mark: while the monster was numbed, it managed to shatter the ice encasing its body, and prepared to resume its attack. This was when monsters were at their most fearsome: when they were cornered. But...

"Hyah!"

That was when Celestina ran in and dealt the finishing blow with her mace.

"Mya—?!"

"Ah—?!"

Ulna and Carosty collapsed on the spot, assaulted by a sudden wave of dizziness. It was the side effect of leveling up.

The quicker you leveled up, the more you felt it—so the fact it was hitting them this hard meant their levels must have gone up by quite a lot.

"It seems like the two of them have leveled up! But I don't think we'll be able to continue for today."

"Yeah. I've gone up as well, but not by as much as those two. Anyway, uh, they're still gonna be feeling tired tomorrow, y'know?"

"I... I am certainly pleased, but at the same time, it is somewhat vexing..."

"Ngh... I can't get up... I'm so out of mana, my head's all spinny..."

The group of five had finished off the monster, but now they had another problem to worry about.

Specifically: how were they going to haul back the body of the crusher rabbit? Only three of them—Celestina, Iris, and Jeanne—could still move properly.

"I think we were able to get a cargo tray to take it back with, right? How do we let them know where we are, though?"

“As I recall, they said that if we send a smoke signal and wait around, mercenaries should come and find us. They gave us some smoke bombs earlier for getting in contact, so let’s use those.”

“I guess we just protect those two until then, right?”

“We’re mostly here for the students, yeah. Even if we take down some big prey mostly by ourselves, if a student so much as breathed in its direction, the materials all go to them... Not exactly a job to get rich off, huh?”

Mercenaries who came all the way here for this job could, in fact, end up taking a loss. Though in the case of Jeanne and the others, they were getting additional income from Duke Delthasis for his special request.

And while they weren’t aware, the amount he’d be giving them would far outstrip the pay that each mercenary here would get from the guild.

The deal with Delthasis had been set up by Zelos, after all.

And as someone who never really cared about the details of money, he hadn’t felt the need to inform them.

“Don’t you think the other mercenaries will just be defeating whatever monsters they can and taking the materials for themselves?”

“Oh, yeah, I get you... The academy can only collect the materials from monsters that the *students* defeat. But if any mercenaries beat something by themselves, they just get to keep all of the loot...”

“The contract we had to agree to didn’t say that the academy gets to take any monsters us *mercenaries* beat. And I don’t think there are too many monsters here the students can take out alone.”

Iris’s level made her a spectacular mage by this world’s standards.

She couldn’t take apart monster corpses, sure, but as a *mage*, she was first-rate. The monsters of the Ramaf Woods were nothing compared to her.

“I struggle to believe this Iris girl! She is the same age as the two of us, yet she managed to deploy multiple spells at once...”

“And she did it without any incantations too. She’s almost like Master...”

“See! I *told* you two I could sense someone stro— *Blegh*. I feel sick...”

Seeing the extent of Iris’s strength for the first time gave Celestina and Carosty—both talented students—an all-new understanding of just how wide the world really was.

Most of the top-scoring students at the academy went on to join the Order of Mages after graduating. But none of them were as powerful as Iris. In fact, they couldn’t even hold a candle to her.

Celestina was starting to get the idea that any mage *Zelos* knew must be well outside the realm of common sense.

“Anyway, we’d better hurry up and call for the recovery squad. More monsters could attack us if we wait too long, y’know?”

“Uh... What were we meant to do again? Call them with a smoke bomb? All righty, then—use the smoke bomb, Celly!”

“Wha—? ‘Celly’?! Oh, um... The smoke bomb! Right! Where was it...?”

Surprised by Iris suddenly giving her a nickname, Celestina pulled a smoke bomb out of a pouch at her waist.

“Um... How am I supposed to use this?”

“Lemme see. *Ohhh*... It’s the same as those thingies they have in cars, huh? It’s easy, then.”

Iris took the cap off the smoke bomb and used Torch to light what seemed to be a fuse at the tip.

It didn’t catch fire, but huge clouds of smoke began billowing out.

Iris’s hands were immediately covered in smoke, and she started coughing.

“I guess you’ve gotta throw these as soon as you light them, huh...?”

“Of *course* you do. You can do some silly things sometimes, huh, Iris?”

“I didn’t think such a little tube could make so much smoke! Ugh, my eyes are stinging...”

It would take a little while before the recovery squad saw the smoke from the smoke bomb and came to meet them.

The group kept a careful eye out for any more monsters as they waited for the squad to arrive.

*

“Fireball!”

FWOOOOOOSH!

An armored boar fell to the ground, wrapped in bright-red flames.

Croesus glanced at the defeated monster for just a moment before searching the area for medicinal herbs. Potion ingredients were far more important than monsters, he thought.

“Dude... You’re *still* focused on that stuff? Even out here? What are you gonna do if more monsters come at us while you’re picking flowers?”

“It’s not like I know how to dismantle their bodies. So isn’t it only logical for me to use my time more effectively?”

“I mean, I guess, but... We’re all the way out in the Ramaf Woods, and you’re still just doing potion research!”

“A mage is never done learning. There are always bigger things to strive toward—I was given a good reminder of that just the other day, in fact. Speaking of which, Makarov, what are you going to do with yourself in the future? Still planning to be an alchemist?”

“Yeah, that’s probably the smartest choice. I’m thinking I might even join up with that faction you and your family run.”

“Well, it’s not *my* faction, specifically. It’s my *grandfather’s*.”

As Croesus and Makarov chatted, the mercenaries with their group used a smoke bomb and kept guard until the recovery squad arrived.

They couldn’t fully dismantle the monsters yet—not here—but they could at least speed up the process by doing some of the preliminary steps now, like draining the blood.

It was about seven hours since Croesus’s party had entered the forest, and so far, it had been smooth sailing. They’d been exploring around the place and

taking out big targets.

And one particular party member, of course, had been searching for medicinal herbs and the like as he explored, hoping to bring them back to use in potion research later. It was rather befitting for a member of the Saint-Germain faction, which was focused on research.

“This plant was poisonous, if I recall correctly. What was it called, a deathlily or something? I think there was supposed to be some kind of deadly poison in its roots and its stalks.”

“Sounds like an assassin’s favorite plant.”

“Its poison makes your skin go all blotchy and purple, and your eyes turn bloodred. If you tried to kill someone with it, it’d be obvious right away what poison you’d used.”

“You sure know a lot about it, don’t you? *Please* tell me you haven’t used it in some experiment on someone.”

Croesus didn’t respond.

“Say something! Did you actually make a potion out of it?! Did you experiment on someone?! You’re scaring me here!”

Still, no answer came.

For now, Croesus was focused on collecting herbs; chatting with Makarov was just a distraction. Croesus had been leveling up too, after all, and it had left him fatigued enough that even talking required real effort.

Not that he was letting that fatigue stop him from picking herbs, of course. He was dedicated to his research, if nothing else.

“Anyway... That mercenary lady seems kinda gloomy, huh? She’s barely said anything to us the whole time, and she keeps muttering to herself.”

“There are plenty of oddballs out there in the world. Do we really need to worry ourselves with what every last one of them is doing?”

“You’re the last person who should be calling someone an oddball.”

Makarov was looking over at a certain woman who seemed to be in the pits

of despair. The whole time, she'd been muttering things like, *Why am I the one who gets stuck with all older boys? Why does Zelos get to guard all the ones I was going for?! The gods must be against me. Yes—the gods are evil. That's it. They're standing in the way of my love...*

It was a far cry from how she usually looked. Right now, she seemed almost like a vengeful apparition, her soul consumed by darkness.

In a word, she was *creepy*.

*

"Diio! There's one headed to you!"

"Shit, these things move fast. They're strong too..."

Zweit's group was fighting some monsters of its own.

They were up against bipedal, dinosaur-like monsters, to be precise. Known as venom raptors, these creatures had vivid purple scales covering their skin and an impressive speed that made them hard for mages to deal with.

Most of the students were struggling to keep up with the things. They were getting in some damage here and there, but they weren't exactly winning the fight.

Besides, there were a *lot* of these monsters. Venom raptors tended to hunt in packs, making them even tougher for mages to keep up with. So far, the party was only surviving as well as it was thanks to the efforts of three very special coccos.

"All right, kiddos! Finish 'em all off! There are a lot of the bastards, but that just means you can't miss!"

"Okay, then—*Fireball!*"

Following the mercenaries' instructions, one of the students took aim at a monster and fired off an attack spell.

But the venom raptor leaped to the left, dodging with ease. They were more cunning than they looked—and this fight was making the students' lack of experience clear.

“Damn things are dodging our spells!”

“They’re really watching us. Are they...*predicting* what we’ll do? So they can dodge?”

The mercenaries’ instructions hadn’t been helpful. At this point, if the students wanted to survive, they’d have to take the initiative themselves. But the coordinated attacks from the raptors weren’t giving them much time to get organized. They had to be careful about this.

A bestial shriek echoed out from somewhere in the forest. It was an order, apparently: as soon as the venom raptors heard it, they responded by getting into formation and beginning to surround the students.

“I wanted to win this fight ourselves, but...at this rate, I think someone’s gonna end up hurt. Or worse. I’ll have to ask, then. Uh... Ukei, was it?”

“Bok?” (“Yes?”)

“There should be a leader somewhere giving these monsters commands. I want you to find them and take them out.”

“Bok.” (“Understood.”)

Having accepted Zweit’s request, the cocos flapped their wings, leaped onto a nearby tree branch, and continued from there to dart from tree to tree, disappearing into the distance.

“Uh, Zweit... You sure we can rely on those things? We’re already kinda struggling here...”

“They’ll get it done. Those are *Teach’s* cocos. They’re not exactly your average birds—you should’ve been able to tell that just by looking at them, right?”

“I mean, yeah, but...”

“Now we just have to hold out.” Zweit turned to the rest of the group. “All right, everyone! Close formation! Save your mana—it’s time for some melee!”

“YEAH!”

All of these students, including Zweit himself, were from the Wiesler faction.

And while they were mages, they'd recently started training in melee combat.

You could only learn so much in a short time frame, of course. But the group had had ample time to acquire some basic fighting skills, and leveling up those skills was actually part of why they'd come to this camp in the first place.

Their training over the last few weeks had been harsh, but the students had kept it up. And now, they were at least *somewhat* capable of fighting.

They weren't exactly experts, mind you, but they were far better off than people who didn't know the first thing about melee combat.

"They're coming!"

"Let me handle it! *GRAH!*"

One of the students made a wide swing with a mace, clobbering one of the venom raptors to death. Without a moment's delay, the next raptor was in its place, continuing the attack—but Zweit and the others were ready. A lot of their training had been done in close formation like this.

Each student was in position, protecting each other while making attack after attack. The raptors were organized for monsters, but they were ultimately still monsters, trying to take down their prey by instinct. To them, this defensive formation was an iron wall.

It had its weaknesses, though. Specifically, since the students didn't have much experience, they'd be at a disadvantage in a drawn-out fight, and they'd doubtless crumble if all of the monsters attacked at once. Their only real hope was for the coccos to take out the monsters' boss, wherever it was hiding.

"Damn! There are too many of these things!"

"Don't panic! If you lose your patience, that's when they'll get you."

"We should really bring some shields with us next time, huh...? Jeez, we aren't acting like mages at all..."

As a general rule, mages were something like artillery. But the students here were fighting almost like *knights*.

In fact, they were probably more like knights than mages right now. But if they didn't protect themselves however they could, they'd die out here, simple

as that. This was no time to worry about being a traditional mage.

Zweit had already known how important close-quarters combat could be, but these other fledgling mages were getting a very personal lesson about it right now.

KA-POOOOOOOM!

Something farther into the forest was launched far into the air.

Taking a closer look, Zweit saw it was a magic beast larger than a venom raptor. He watched as it spun through the air and, eventually, plummeted hard into the ground.

“It’s a venom rex. Those chickens got to it, huh?”

“*Yeah!* All right, monsters—it’s our turn now!”

“Let’s kill ’em all! Hit ’em with all our magic at once!”

GA-PYOOOOOONG!

“*Wha—?!*”

Right as the students were about to begin their counteroffensive, they were taken aback by the sight of a *second* venom rex being blasted into the sky. It was clearly dead; its whole body had been torn by deep gashes, and it was hemorrhaging blood.

Then came *another* one—this one alive, running, from deeper into the forest. Its movements were stiff, though. It looked like it had been paralyzed.

Eventually, the paralysis worsened, and the monster collapsed to the ground mid run, unable to move any further.

“Th-There were *three* of them?!”

“Were we, uh... Were we even more screwed than we thought?”

“Yeah... No way we would’ve been able to survive that ourselves. Not against three leaders...”

“Seriously, though, those coccos are just too strong!”

With their leaders all gone, the venom raptors became confused. Most of

them started getting ready to turn and flee.

It looked like they couldn't keep themselves organized without their leaders.

"This is our chance! Kill as many of these things as we can while they don't know what's going on!"

"YEAH!"

And unorganized as they were, the monsters would be routed in a matter of moments.

With no leader to give them commands, the venom raptors were just milling about in a panicked frenzy. It wasn't even a real fight. The weaker specimens were the first to run, while the more aggressive ones tried to attack Zweit and his comrades by themselves.

But now that each member of the pack was acting independently, it was just a matter of crushing them one by one.

The fight was over quickly.

You kind of had to feel bad for the two mercenaries assigned to guard the group. The coccos had just proven themselves to be far more reliable.

"Uh... Why are we even here, again?"

"Don't say it out loud. You'll only make me feel *more* like shit."

The two men were visibly depressed.

The students had been surprisingly coordinated with their melee fighting, and the coccos were absurdly powerful. It hadn't really left the two of them with a chance to do anything.

It wasn't as if these mercenaries were unusually weak. Not at all. But they were practically amateurs when it came to group combat; they'd never fought in large numbers before. There were plenty of mercenaries out there like this, and if ever they had to take part in a war, they usually struck off on their own and died at the start of their first battle.

If they were particularly strong, then *maybe* they'd be able to survive...but battles were more about quantity than quality. You still didn't have a great

chance of living if you went off by yourself, however strong you were.

These mercenaries were learning the importance of group combat for the first time. The way these students were fighting had given them a shock, that much was for sure.

“Guess that’s it for the training for now. We get the corpses collected, and we rest for the day. Don’t wanna be tired tomorrow, after all.”

“You’re right. It’d be dangerous to push ourselves too hard. We have to know when to pull back.”

“Yeah... I’m a little tired, and I’ve leveled up. My body feels super heavy.”

“All right—I’ll use a smoke bomb, okay? Then we’ve just gotta make sure we keep an eye on our surroundings until the recovery squad gets here.”

These students from the Wiesler faction had decided that breaks were an important part of their battle strategy. They were amateurs, sure, but they knew their limits, and they’d come to the conclusion that heading any deeper into the forest would be too dangerous right now. Besides, all of them bar Zweit were tired enough from leveling up that it was hard to say whether they *could’ve* kept fighting, even if they’d wanted to.

Once the smoke bomb was lit and the recovery squad had arrived, the students joined them in retreating to the camp.

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“Um... How long do we need to stay in this thing for?”

“I don’t know. Ask him.”

The party of younger students had been hiding in a pillbox for a while now, shooting at monsters from safely inside. More and more monsters had continued to gather, and they’d leveled up quite a bit. But at this point, there were so many monsters around that they couldn’t leave anymore.

The group had been firing off attack spells until their mana ran out, waiting for their mana to recover, then doing the same thing again.

But the more monsters they killed, the more the smell of blood enticed new monsters to come, and there were enough around now that they were blocking

the way back to the camp.

“Hmm... Looks like my plan worked a little *too* well, eh? What to do, what to do...?”

“Y-You *fool*! How are we supposed to return to our camp now?! What are you going to do about this?!”

“How about we *don't* go back? We just stay out here, leveling up? That's what you're all here for in the first place, right? That sounds good!”

“What do you expect us to eat?! Should we not return before sunset, we will be too late to even dine!”

“Going hungry for one day's not going to kill you. Besides, if you ever get stranded in a battle, you'll probably end up in a situation like this anyway. You can think of this as training for if that ever happens to you.”

“I *cannot* be expected to spend the night sleeping in a makeshift hovel!”

Lavuerin had been spoiled his entire life. He couldn't even *imagine* sleeping in the pillbox for the night.

If the group here were in a *real* battle, he probably would've been abandoned long ago.

No one ever wanted to deal with a selfish, overbearing commander.

Zelos smirked at the boy. “You really *are* a pampered little boy, aren't you? See, this is why people look down on you...”

Here it came again. The cruelty, the callousness, in Zelos's voice left Lavuerin too stunned to think of a retort.

“Do you really think some little hurdle like *this* is the end of the world? Don't make me laugh. This is nowhere *near* what the Far-Flung Green Depths has to offer. Out here in nature, your authority, your family, mean *nothing*. It's survival of the fittest—and I mean that survival part literally. You'd do well to remember that.”

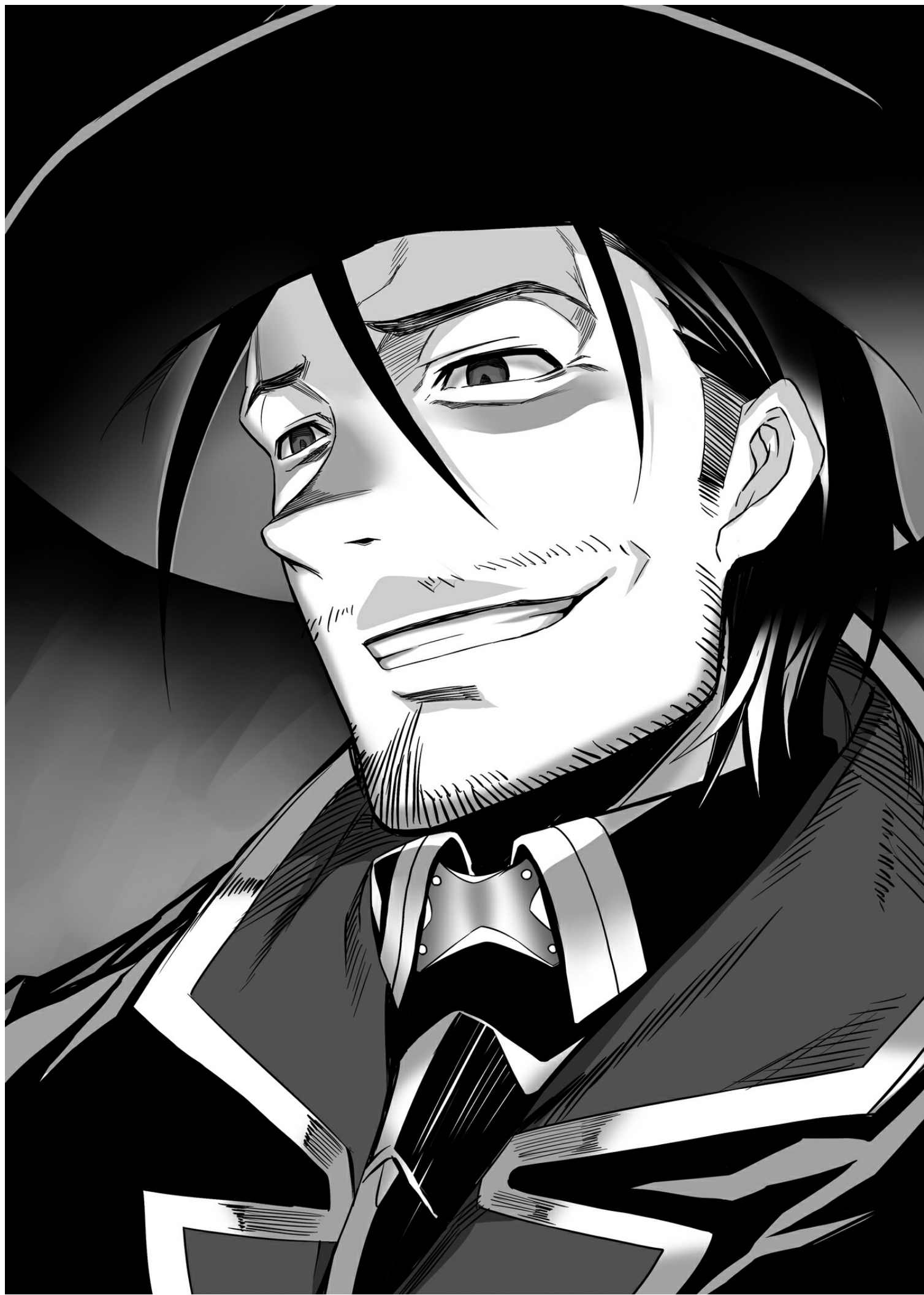
It was the return of “the Zelos from back then.” This vast forest had reawakened the savage warrior sleeping inside him.

That warrior, that terrible beast, had survived in a grueling environment and experienced the *true* terror of “survival of the fittest.” And now, it was opening its eyes again. Zelos’s lips curled into a cold, cunning grin.

He removed the mask covering his eyes, revealing his expression to the group for the first time.

He was *sneering* at the boys—and he seemed to be enjoying it too. It was like he was possessed.

In short, he looked about as evil as you could get.



“Now... Allow me to show you hell. Starting now, you kids are going to be fighting, and fighting, and fighting, until you’re begging for mercy. But I will hear no complaints. You will not whine. You will not give up. You will not be allowed to die, as much as you may long for the respite it would bring. *Fight*. See it through to the end. Survive...if you can. *Mwa ha ha ha ha!*”

The boys paled. And then they realized: their expedition was barely getting started...

Back at the campsite, one party of young students failed to return at the end of the day.

They were far too busy for that—they were fighting for their lives, after all. Fighting all night long, under the watchful eye of a mad mage who’d reverted to his savage instincts.

“Someone... Please, anyone... *SAVE US!!!*”

The boys’ screams for mercy were met with nothing but their own echoes.

Larsus, by the way, was still with the group. He helped out when things got dangerous, but for the most part, he was just watching it all happen.

One thing, and one thing alone, was for sure: the boys had no choice but to fight their way out of a battlefield from hell.

Chapter 12: The Old Guy Teaches a Lesson on Nature's Wrath

It was the second day of combat training in the Ramaf Woods.

Zweit was doing fine, but everyone else in his group, Diio included, was unable to move due to the side effects of leveling up.

The venom raptors the group had defeated were stronger than goblins, and their levels had apparently been pretty high too—not to mention their sheer numbers. Defeating them all had given the group a lot of levels, but also a lot of fatigue to match. And even after a night's sleep, that fatigue was stubbornly refusing to go away.

Zweit was perfectly fine, but he was the only one. His group wouldn't be able to head out for more combat training like this.

"Didn't think you'd *all* end up stuck in your bedrolls... Guess I'll have to wait a while until all your bodies have adjusted."

"Urgh... Sorry, Zweit. I think I should be fine by tomorrow."

There was still a lot that wasn't known about the phenomenon referred to as "leveling up." One theory was that defeating monsters with a lot of life force caused you to absorb their spiritual power, which then strengthened not only your own spirit but also your physical body.

Specifically, leveling up could be broken into three categories: "mind," "arts," and "body." Mind referred to your one's spirit, or your mental state, and it was thought that leveling it up bolstered your existence, your presence, in the world; it was the kind of thing that didn't show up in a status screen. Leveling up your arts, meanwhile, improved your skill levels, while leveling up your body was, as you would expect, about strengthening your physical body.

The stronger a monster was, the higher its mind, arts, and body levels would be—and the stronger the enemies you defeated, the faster your own levels would rise.

In addition, even monsters of the same level could be significantly stronger or weaker than each other depending on the environment they lived in. Generally, the harsher a monster's habitat, the stronger they would become—and so aside from their level, monsters were also considered to have a separate *rank*.

When you saw the difference in monster strength between the Ramaf Woods and the Far-Flung Green Depths, you'd find it hard to try and refute that theory. Regardless of the mechanism, though, there was one thing people knew for sure: defeating strong opponents helped you yourself become stronger.

Still, scholarly theories aside, there was a bit of a bothersome problem with the whole "leveling up" thing.

In fact, you might have noticed it yourself: if someone low-level wanted to get stronger, they had to defeat higher-level opponents. It was either that or defeat great *numbers* of foes. And whichever route you took, even succeeding would place a burden on your body, leaving you unable to even move for a little while after you leveled up. There were all sorts of symptoms you could get—exhaustion, joint pain, headaches, nausea, numbness—and the stronger the enemies you defeated, the worse those symptoms would be. Collectively, the proper term for these symptoms was physical adjustment, and they were the sign that your body was adjusting, *optimizing* itself, to its newfound strength.

Most people tended to just call this "level-up sickness." But whatever you called it, it typically left you defenseless and unable to fight, so it was something you had to really watch out for on the battlefield.

It happened when you won against a lot of monsters—or, as mentioned above, *strong* monsters—but it was something like labor pains from giving birth to a new, stronger you.

Seeing as the existence of this phenomenon helped you get stronger, it wasn't necessarily *bad*...but if the enemy you beat was powerful enough, there was the chance that you'd have your mind, arts, and body all improve at once. And that would leave you racked by level-up sickness that much worse, and for that much longer. There had even been the rare occasion on which someone had leveled up so rapidly that their body hadn't been able to endure it, and they'd died on the spot.

This was why Diio had ended up out of commission. He'd probably pushed himself defeating monsters, eager as could be...but when you were still weak, it was best to pace yourself on monster hunts.

Seeing how Diio was already managing to move—albeit barely—despite his level-up sickness, Zweit figured he'd probably make a recovery by tomorrow. Their group wouldn't really have a problem with their grades either way, but it was still unfortunate that they were losing out on a precious day of training.

"I mean... Just sleep for today. We're gonna go hard tomorrow to make up for it though, all right?"

"Go easy on me, please. Honestly, I'm not sure I'd make it back to the academy if I had to walk there in *this* state..."

"I'll think about it."

It was the second proper day of the training camp, and Zweit's party was out of commission. They'd have to waste the entire day achieving nothing.

"Well... Guess I've got some time on my hands. Only question is what to do with it..."

Zweit had been forced to take part in this training camp whether he wanted to or not, but that wasn't a problem for him; he *did* want to be here. He'd joined in previous years too, hoping to get some combat training out of it. It felt a little pointless being here when he couldn't *do* that, though. His own level hadn't gone up either.

He was mostly here to see how he was at coordinating tactics with party members in a real fight, which would give him information that'd be useful in putting together strategies in the future. But a single day of fighting had now left the party needing an entire day of rest; it was a bummer. Getting rest was important in any conflict, sure, but it felt bad when he and he alone was perfectly fine.

"Mmm... How about I go see Celestina? She's probably in a similar spot to me."

With nothing to do, Zweit started heading over to see his sister, figuring that she was probably just as free as he was right now, and for the same reason to

boot. The cocos trailed behind him as he went—and the sight of them left bystanders with fear in their eyes.

They'd seen yesterday just how ferocious these birds could get, after all. They were all on their guard.

The cocos were really making a name for themselves—not that they had any clue.

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Weaving between the tents that lined the campsite, Zweit eventually arrived at Celestina's tent.

By the side of the tent were Celestina and Ulna, simmering something in a little pot. Most likely, they'd gathered some medicinal herbs, and were using them to make some sort of recovery potion.

Croesus and Makarov were nearby too. The two of them were doing something similar...though Croesus was really shaking.

The sight of him gave Zweit a bad feeling, so he went over to the two of them to see what was up.

“Hey, Croesus... You're really shaking there, huh? You sure you shouldn't be asleep right now?”

“Oh... Brother, is it? I got my hands on quite the nice materials yesterday, you see. And then I just couldn't help myself, so I started putting together some potions, and...I couldn't stop. Heh heh heh. Though yes, I suppose having shaky hands might cause me to mess up my potion compounding...”

“*Sleep*, dammit! There's no way this trip's gonna go well for you if you're like *that!*”

“Surely you can't expect me to sleep when such fine materials are just sitting there, begging to be worked with! You're asking the impossible. It's not even an option. If you took my research away from me, I'd have nothing left.”

“Don't just...*admit* that! It's sad! It makes you sound like you're all...empty inside!”

Croesus lived for his research. He was pushing through his exhaustion, like he

was whipping himself into shape, to keep making potions. And the fact that he'd pretty much just admitted he had nothing going for him in life apart from his research left Zweit with a smidge of worry for his younger brother's future.

If you're aware of it, then fix it already, he wanted to say.

"Zweit... Stop Croesus for me. Please. I don't know *what* kind of crazy concoction he'll end up making if he keeps this up. *I* can't stop him, at least. I can barely even stand..."

"So you've leveled up too, huh, McKellen? Yeah, you're trembling too, now that I look at you."

"My name's *Makarov*... Can you hurry up and remember it already? I don't even have the energy to correct you right now..."

"You just did, though."

Most of the students who'd experienced combat on their first day were bedridden in a similar state. Overnight, the camp had been transformed into almost a field hospital. Just about the only ones who were fine were the mercenaries, as well as the students who hadn't done any fighting yesterday —*they* were making their way into the forest, eager to start the day.

"My party's already been registered, and we're not allowed to go into the forest with anyone else. Can't change our party members either, so I'm just bored out of my mind right now. And I didn't bring my potion-making tools with me..."

"We're here to level up too, but Croesus brought *his* tools with him. The guy has a *ridiculous* amount of luggage. Took up half a carriage."

"Jeez, that's overkill. Uh... Wait. Croesus? What exactly are you making there? Just looking at it, there are some really suspicious-looking fumes coming out of it..."

"Oh. Did I add too much moconaweed, perhaps? The mixture's started foaming... Hmm. This one might be a failure."

Hands still shaking, Croesus scribbled down some notes on a clipboard as he spoke.

The mixture bubbling away in the pot started to build up more and more scum-like foam on top—and eventually, a horrible, stinging odor began to spread throughout the area.

“Seriously, Croesus... What the hell have you made here?! Ugh, my eyes...”

“I thought I’d be able to take a poisonous plant, neutralize its poison, and use it as a powerful active ingredient. That was the plan, at least... It started to have an odd reaction when I added the powdered magic stone, though. How strange. I’ve never gotten a result like this before...”

“Uh... Croesus? That stuff in the mortar you’re holding... I don’t think it’s actually magic stone powder.”

“Oh? Ah, yes—now that you mention it, this is sparkweed root, isn’t it? The color’s so similar; I must have gotten the two confused.”

“You *what*?!”

Zweit decided to evacuate at full speed.

Thankfully, Croesus had neutralized the poison, so what he’d made didn’t harm anyone. But it had such a foul, stinging odor that those nearby had tears come to their eyes—and it took a while for them to stop.

Poor Makarov was the worst off out of everyone...

As the fumes gradually dispersed to a wider area, plenty of the other students and mercenaries fell victim to it too. Zweit, for his part, wasted no time in taking refuge near Celestina’s tent, which was upwind of Croesus.

“Ugh, that sucked. Dammit, Croesus... You shouldn’t be experimenting with potions when you’re like that!”

“Are you okay, Brother? And are... Are you saying that Croesus is *always* doing these kinds of things?”

“Probably, yeah. Must be hard being Macbeth...”

“Um... I thought his name was Mackerel? Or... No. Was it McEnroe, perhaps?”

The siblings still hadn’t memorized poor Makarov’s name.

“By the way, have you seen Teach around?”

“I’ve been wondering where he is myself, actually. I asked Iris earlier, and she said his group never came back to the campsite yesterday. Iris and her companions didn’t seem particularly worried, though...”

“They never came back? Hold on, hold on... Don’t tell me he’s gone back to acting how he was *back then*.”

“I think it’s likely. Apparently Lena went earlier and checked out the tents of the party Zelos was guarding, and came back muttering, ‘They’re not there... My sweet little boys... Where have they gone?’”

“Uh... Is it just me, or does that lady sound kinda dangerous? I’m getting real ‘criminal’ vibes from what you just said...”

Zweit had a keen intuition. Of course, he wouldn’t have usually suspected one of his teacher’s acquaintances of having an unhealthy obsession with young boys. But he was having a hard time interpreting Celestina’s words any other way.

“Anyway, though... He hasn’t come back, huh? Are those kids with him gonna be okay? Seriously...”

“If he really has returned to how he was *back then*, I’d imagine that about now, they’re probably...”

“Probably going through hell, yeah. And the lot he’s got with him probably believe all that naive stuff they’ve been taught by the teachers at the academy. Wouldn’t surprise me if Teach decided it was a good opportunity to give them all a lesson about how things really are... He *does* get kinda wild when he goes into a forest.”

“Yes, but... Back when we were in the Far-Flung Green Depths, all of our food got stolen, so he didn’t really have much of a choice. That’s not the case this time. And yet...”

“I think one of the kids in his group was a spoiled, arrogant brat... Pretty sure Teach’d be tempted to whip him into shape.”

Having survived in the Far-Flung Green Depths, Zelos knew the wonders of nature better than anyone.

Above all, he was familiar with how terrifying monsters could be—and how many forms that terror could take. So when he saw someone acting full of themselves just because they could use some halfway decent magic, he got the urge to teach them the error of their ways.

Right about now, that kid was probably being made painfully aware of just how fragile the safety he'd been brought up in really was, how easily it could crumble. There were few things scarier than that.

The students with him had been dragged into a harsh world of life-and-death decisions.

“Oh, right—I heard your group beat a pretty big monster, yeah? A...crusher rabbit, was that it? Amazed you managed to take it out with that group of yours.”

“One of the guards with us is a mage who's sort of like Master. And she's about the same age as I am... It was kind of a shock.”

“Whoa. What, is she an acquaintance of his or something?”

“Yes. She was casting multiple spells at once—and without incantations for any of them. It was hardly what I'd expect from a mercenary. She was more on par with a court mage... No. Maybe even above that.”

“And... And she's *your* age, you said? What, is she a prodigy? Don't tell me she's the same kind of person as Teach... Ugh. You know what? I don't wanna think about it.”

The existence of Iris was about as shocking as that of Zelos.

Depending on how you looked at it, she *was* the same kind of person as Zelos. She wasn't a Great Sage, though. Specifically, she was a High Sorceress.

“Things got a little bit dangerous at some points, but thankfully the mercenaries were there to save us, so we were all oka— Hmm? Now that I think about it, why do both of our parties have two mercenaries guarding us? Some of the bigger parties even have three or more. Wasn't there meant to only be one mercenary guarding each group?”

“Well, part of it's because Samtrol and his band of idiots disappeared, but

apparently there were also some of the younger students who gave up on the trip before we even left the academy. Oh, and some of the nobles here have overprotective parents who arranged their own guards, so there were some extra mercenaries left over.”

“It’s good for us, I suppose, but will the academy be able to pay for all of these mercenaries? I feel like I heard it was already running at a loss...”

“Yeah, I *bet* it is. The nobles keep demanding that the academy spends money on all sorts of stuff, so it’s struggling. Some of the idiots out there, I swear...”

The management of the Istol Academy of Magic was independent from the state, and most of it consisted of mages belonging to one faction or another. In other words, even the mages who ran the academy couldn’t stand up against the magic nobles, many of whom were faction bigwigs. They were left with no choice but to comply with whatever unreasonable demands they received.

In fact, those faction bigwigs were something like the bosses of the academy management—and if those bosses said, “I’m sending some mercenaries to guard my heir, so manage that all for me, will you~?”, the managers were practically forced to deal with the mercenaries’ guild to make those arrangements work.

As far as the mercenaries were concerned, they could get paid for both the noble’s request to guard their heir *and* the guild’s request to guard other students, so it was a tempting offer. As a result, more and more mercenaries had decided to take part—and with that came increased costs.

This was nothing new either, and so the training camp ended with a deficit every year. Not that Celestina had any idea. She’d never taken part in one of the academy’s official events before.

Samtrol’s bloodline supremacists had disappeared too, leaving free mercenaries who had no one to guard—and so the academy had responded by assigning those mercenaries to parties that already had guards. Put that all together, and now a regular-sized party had two or three guards, with the largest even having a full five.

“Also, not like it really matters, but...how is that beastfolk girl in your party so energetic? She was out hunting monsters with you, right? I thought everyone in

your group would be exhausted from leveling up...”

“Maybe it’s *because* she’s a beastfolk? I did hear from Master that beastfolk are quick at adapting to their environments. Perhaps her body already finished optimizing itself to its new strength?”

“*Damn*, that’s fast. Even the two of us were pretty lethargic for a few days back in the Green Depths.”

Ulna had started sparring with Ukei and the other coccos at some point. Lying around nearby were the collapsed victims who’d been caught up in Croesus’s failed experiment.

Croesus himself, the instigator of the whole incident, seemed unaffected—and he’d already gotten to work on testing *another* potion. By the looks of it, he was either highly resistant to poisons, or he’d picked up the Poison Nullification skill at some point.

Whatever the cause, Zweit was amazed by his brother’s tenaciousness.

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The group of boys was trudging through the forest.

Having survived bloody battlefields teeming with monsters of every kind, they were exhausted to their limits, both physically and mentally. But they were forcing themselves, somehow, to make their way back to camp.

“Nearly there. Just a little bit more, and we’ll be back at camp...”

“I’m not afraid of anything anymore. This world really *is* about survival of the fittest. Peace is merely an illusion, as fragile as paper...”

“I have to defeat my enemies. Protect my allies. There is no god. I can believe in nothing but my own power, and the allies who’ve been with me through thick and thin...”

“I was wrong. Nobility, titles...it all means nothing. This world is hell. And I have to get strong if I want to survive in it...”

They were exhausted, but at the same time, they had a strange glint to their eyes.

It was the look of wounded, savage beasts—bruised, battered, but still with the will to fight.

Even if any monsters *did* appear now, these boys were ready to fight it out to the end. They were like the formidable warriors from the history books; they showed no openings, immediately getting into battle formation in response to even the slightest noise from nearby.

There wasn't even a trace of the boyish innocence they'd had just yesterday.

"Looks like you've all gotten yourselves a good dose of reality, eh? Levelled up too. *I'd* say it's a success~! ♪"

"Mm... You sure this is okay? They hardly even look like kids anymore."

"Everyone has to grow up someday. They've just learned the cruelty of the real world sooner than most—and it's turned them into some fine warriors. Heh heh heh..."

"Sure they're not just brainwashed? Looks to me like you were trying to indoctrinate them with some pretty extreme stuff."

"Oh, I'm just *teaching* them. As soon as you take one step out of modern society, all that's awaiting you is one question: will you eat, or will you be eaten? Though, well, isn't teaching just another kind of brainwashing, at the end of the day? Whatever you call it, Lavuerin was pretty rotten. If he's changed, that's not a bad thing."

"I'm with you on that, at least."

Having spent the whole night fighting within the forest—exhausted but wringing out every last drop of energy they had to stay alive—the boys had come out the other end of it reborn as warriors.

"The environment you're brought up in, what you're born with... None of it matters. If you're weak, you just have to fight. Fight. Survive. Get strong."

"There are no shortcuts in life. The only secret to strength is having the guts to dive into danger... At the same time, cowardice is nothing to be ashamed of. Be cunning. Be composed. Know your enemies. Don't overestimate yourself."

"Gather knowledge. Learn skills. Hone your mind. With the right perspective,

and a calm head, even weakness is an advantage you can use to take out your enemies. Don't let yourself forget how cruel reality can be..."

The boys were chanting mantras like they'd reached some kind of spiritual enlightenment. But from an outsider's perspective, it was more like their minds had been utterly broken.

Finally, they arrived at the camp. They were back. They were safe.

They were exhausted enough that they would've loved to go straight to their tents and sleep. But just as they returned, a man came running up to them. He was somewhere between middle-aged and elderly, and he seemed to be a butler.

"*Sir Lavueriiiiin!* I am... I am so glad to see you are safe... Why, this old man here was *beside* himself with worry!"

"I'm sorry to make you worry, Breefes. I'm all right."

Immediately, Zelos and Larsus had the same thought: "*Breefes*"?! So... "*briefs*"? *Seriously?! This isn't just some kind of joke? Why's an outsider here, anyway?*

This combat training camp was part of the academy's curriculum. Outsiders like servants shouldn't have been here. But this man here—Breefes, apparently—looked awfully like a butler, handlebar mustache and all. He ran over to Lavuerin, tears in his eyes...and a half-eaten bread roll in his right hand.

"Are you injured?! Have you eaten?! Why, I have been so worried about you that I have been unable to even eat..."

"Mm... What's that bread roll you're holding, then? Never mind. Anyway, old Breefes, I have something to say: I've been a fool."

"Wh-What?"

"All these years, I've been so prideful, so arrogant. About being from a house of earls, about the thought that some day I'd inherit that family name myself. Never even reflecting on myself..."

"But...it is only *natural* that you would be prideful, is it not?! You have much to be proud of! What has happened to you, Sir Lavuerin?"

“What I’m saying is...that was all wrong. All of those fragile constructs—an earl’s house, its social standing—they were meaningless in the face of nature’s wrath. If I keep clinging to those foolish ideas, they will get me killed. I would be nothing but a nameless buffoon, forgotten by history.”

“S-Sir Lavuerin? Did you eat something strange, perhaps? Why, I am *certainly* not complaining about this new you, if it is truly so, but...”

Breefes was used to the usual Lavuerin. He was bewildered at suddenly coming face-to-face with this brave, reborn young man—but at the same time, it looked like it had his heart beginning to flutter. It was a bit of an overreaction. Maybe this butler was pretty shady himself.

“Witness me, Breefes! I will turn our house into one of honor, one that will go down in history—I swear it, on the name Onmahed! Ah... It feels like I have been reborn. Even this exhaustion feels welcome, if I picture it as the proof of the trials I have overcome on my way to glory.”

Stop! Just stop already! I’m not even part of this, and you’re embarrassing me! And you, old man! That posture of yours is making you look suspicious!

Zelos and Larsus were back to making silent retorts.

Breefes—Lavuerin’s caretaker—was starting to violently shake his hips in joy. Maybe he was just that happy to see young Lavuerin mature.

“I think I shall... Yes. I shall have my father enter into an early retirement. He is a disgrace upon our family! Privilege? Position? That is not what nobles should be about! Being a noble is about our duty to the people! First, I will need retainers I can trust. Without reform, our territory will eventually fall to ruin. No... It is already on the way there!”

“Sir Lavuerin! Such gallant words... Why, I cannot contain my joy!”

I don’t like the way that old guy’s moving his hips. Please tell me that’s not...

Who is this kid, Shingen Takeda or something? If he keeps going like this, I can see him taking over the other nobles around him—annihilating them, maybe—and starting up a war... Is that what he wants? He certainly seems eager to overthrow whoever’s in power, that’s for sure...

Having awakened to his pride as a noble, Lavuerin had his sights set on what he needed to do, and he was already starting to work toward his vision for the future. The fledgling future earl's arrogance had vanished, replaced with a burning sense of honor and righteousness. Right now, Lavuerin came across as a cool, dashing young man...as long as you forgot about his name.

"I suppose we can leave them alone for now. Besides, I feel like I don't want to get involved in whatever's going to happen with them..."

"Yeah."

Breefes was far from the only one shocked by the return—and the *transformation*—of the boys.

Their teachers and fellow students, too, were left speechless by how their time in that hell had changed them. They didn't know what to say. The boys just had a different *aura* from everyone else around them now.

One woman in particular was quivering at the sight of the reformed boys...and glaring at Zelos.

"Zelos!"

"Wh-What is it, Lena? I'd really like to get myself some food right about now, you see..."

"What have you done to my sweet little boys?! They were... They were so *cute* before! But now they all look like...warriors! Men who've come back from the brink of death!"

"I don't know when they became *your* boys, but you're right about them having survived some near-death situations, at least! Life in that forest is about as simple—and as terrifying—as you can get, after all..."

"What... What *happened* to those *boys*?!"

"Oh? Would you like me to tell you?"

Zelos began to recount the tale of the last couple of days. And what a tale it was...

In front of the boys were packs of ravenous carnivores, swarming over the pile of monster corpses.

The boys were still inside the pillbox Zelos had built, firing off attack magic from inside. Whenever they ran low on mana, they'd rest for a short while to recover, then get right back to attacking. It was a simple process.

But they wouldn't be able to keep this up forever. Sure, the pillbox was camouflaged, but as more and more attacks came flying from its direction, even the less intelligent monsters would eventually realize what was going on.

In fact...here they came now. Monsters were starting to rush toward the pillbox.

"Ha *hah*! This is a fine charge they're making, isn't it? Now—do you want to survive? Because if you do...*kill them all*. This is reality. It's the world outside of the safe little box you've lived your whole lives in. Kill or be killed. If you're the latter, you'll be eaten up; it's that simple. They won't even leave your bones behind."

"H-Help me! My mana's..."

"If you're out of mana, fight with a weapon until it comes back. Your staff would be a good option. Even just thwacking something with it should work pretty well. You know, perhaps I could open up a hole in the wall here—*force* you all to fight up close. How does that sound?"

The students all screamed in fear. There was a devil here in the Ramaf Woods—and he was a human.

The boys here had come to this combat training camp with pretty simple goals: *I'm gonna level up, and I'll show all those people who looked down on me how wrong they were!* That kind of thing. They would've been satisfied just leveling up *a little*...but now they found themselves isolated, surrounded by monsters, wondering where exactly it had all gone wrong. And the two mercenaries who were here to guard them—Zelos and Larsus—were only stepping in if things got *really* dicey.

If they wanted to survive, they had to fight. With no other choice, they were pushing their bodies to the limits, tears in their eyes as they swung their staffs

at the monsters. And, just like that...twelve hours passed.

“If you can’t survive something like *this*, you’d die to a little goblin if you ever went to the Far-Flung Green Depths. That place is on a whole different level... You need to get stronger. Then even stronger than that. *Gah ha ha ha ha...*”

We have to work together. Take down our enemies efficiently... Keep an eye on our surroundings...

We only have so many people, so even losing one ally could doom us all. We need to be careful. Protect each other.

Magic’s just our trump card... Melee attacks are good enough for now...

Gotta wipe out our enemies... If we don’t, we’ll be the ones who end up dead... This world’s all just survival of the fittest...

Finally, the boys’ thoughts all came together: *Die, you bastards! Die so we can live!*

These boys had been reborn as warriors. They hadn’t had any other choice. And what followed was a scene of pure carnage.

A boy killed a goblin, stole its weapon, used that weapon to kill a different monster, then leaped toward his next prey.

They were all desperate to survive. Surviving meant killing these monsters—and to do that, they had to become animals themselves.

Things like human ethics were meaningless in the face of Mother Nature’s wrath. The boys, now warriors, had shoved all of those unnecessary things away into a little corner of their minds. And as they fought, they were learning. Optimizing. Adapting.

With nothing in their heads but making it back alive, they were all feeling an abnormal adrenaline rush as they leveled up and grew their mana pools. That—and sheer willpower—were all that was letting them push through the exhaustion from leveling up. Rest could come later. For now, what mattered was taking out the monsters.

It was do-or-die. Things went on like that for a while...until they noticed, at some point, that every monster around them was now dead.

Good. That should have made them a fair bit stronger. They'll be a far sight better than the other students, at least...

Larsus, for his part, was as stunned as you'd expect. *I've never seen such a terrifying training camp in my life...*

He'd actually taken part in this combat training camp as a guard a few times before, but this was the first time he'd seen the students so cornered, so exhausted, so far beyond their limits. But at the same time, he could tell Zelos was putting them in just enough danger to make them realize the severity of their situation, but not so much danger that they'd die. It was a real balancing act.

The boys looked around, making sure that there were no more enemies, before starting to stumble their way back to the camp.

But as tired as they were, they weren't letting their guards drop. Not anymore. Their battle wasn't over until they made it the whole way back alive.

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"Anyway, that's about the gist of it. Long story short, they all got stronger, and they all made it back in one piece! All's well that ends well. Aha ha ha ha!"

"You *demon*! You destroyed their innocent little hearts! Brainwashed them! Turned them into warriors! *Savages*! How *dare* you?!"

"Aww. That's not a very nice way to put it. The whole point of this training camp is to help the students to get stronger, after all... And I've just helped them with that, haven't I?"

"That doesn't mean you need to... To steal their purity like that!"

"Purity and innocence get you killed. They've just learned a lesson, that's all. Learned that out here in the real world, it's kill or be killed... The world's not such a kind place."

"But did they have to learn that *right now*? Couldn't it have waited?!"

"If they're going to learn it eventually, the sooner the better, right? After all, this country's right on the border of a pretty dangerous place..."

Right next to the Magic Kingdom of Solistia was the Far-Flung Green Depths.

In fact, most of the country looked out onto that vast forest—and if any dangerous monsters ever emerged from it, there was virtually no one in the country who'd stand a chance against them.

Imagine, say...a dragon. After all, there were barely even any people in the country who could take out wyverns. Not only were the people here low-level, but they were also *satisfied* with their mediocrity, and thought they were better than they really were.

If any monsters *did* come flooding out from the Green Depths, the country wouldn't even be able to put up a proper fight. It'd be a one-sided slaughter. That was just how big the gap in strength was.

And if that was the case, maintaining the status quo meant people would just get slaughtered if anything did happen. But getting stronger now, while they had the chance, might give them a better chance of surviving.

"But... But that doesn't mean you had to..."

Lena was looking over at the boys.

"Wow. I'd forgotten just how...*peaceful* peace could be. How relaxing it is. I can't believe how happy I am right now..."

"I get it now. It all makes sense. If anything's going to threaten this peace, I'll kill it. Whatever it takes."

"The gods won't lift a finger to help us. So we have to get stronger. As strong as we can, if we want to protect this peace..."

"Yeah. And it's not just monsters...some of the *people* are threats too. At least the monsters are up-front about it. Evil is just a monster of a different kind—and if we don't eliminate it at the roots, we could end up living and dying as the pawns in someone's plan."

It was here that the boys joined together in a chant: "Annihilate our enemies! Whether they're monsters or humans! Stand up for the people! Sieg Solistia!"

"Sir Lavueriiiiin! You're so *dreamy*!"

The boys' fury wasn't directed just at monsters, but also at any lowlifes who planned to do evil in the shadows of human society.

It sort of resembled how people could read too much into a book that preached morals and build on it with time, until eventually it became the sacred book of a full-fledged *religion*. Zelos's methods for surviving out in the wild were becoming something of a bible for the boys in his group.

They were starting to incorporate things he hadn't even said, and take what he *had* said to the next level. It was like how special forces put together to wreak havoc in a foreign country could come back radicalized into terrorists.

It was actually scary just how rapidly the boys were starting to fall into extremism.

"Ah... Did I go a little too far out there, perhaps? I'm sure I only taught them the basics of how to deal with monsters, but now they're turning into some sort of far-right group who wants an armed uprising... I wonder why?"

"Don't ask *me*! Dammit, Zelos, *you're* the one who made them that way!"

"No, no, there was no way I could've predicted *this*. It looks like they already had some resentment toward how the academy's run, if nothing else. Anyway, though... I'm kind of curious about that butler. I wonder if the boy with him's going to be okay..."

"Mmm... He has the same smell to him as I do. I'm not okay with him, though, and I can't even put my finger on why..."

"I'm not sure I wanted to know that. I kind of had my suspicions, at least, but there was a reason I didn't say it out loud... Hopefully Lavuerin manages to protect his chastity."

Zelos was perfectly aware of Lena's proclivities.

But despite their similarities, Lena just couldn't bring herself to accept Breefes—probably because while she at least went after the opposite sex, Breefes seemed to be interested in the *same* sex. That difference made her unable to see him as a kindred spirit.

They were both doing the same thing, but there was a wall between the two of them that stopped them from understanding each other.

"So you hate your own kind, eh...? I suppose there are all sorts of things out

there in the world that don't make sense. Birds of a feather, refusing to flock together..."

"I'm not exactly thrilled about getting lumped in with him..."

In Zelos's eyes, Lena and Breefes were the same.

The only difference was that one went after the same sex as themselves, while the other went for the opposite sex. But when both were looking to sink their fangs into innocent young boys, he was hardly about to approve of either one of them.

"Anyway... We pulled an all-nighter out there, so I'm a little tired. I think I'll get to my tent and rest."

"Wai— Zelos! I haven't finished talking yet! Turn those boys back to how they were before!"

"No can do. Now that they've started down that path, there's no stopping them."

Sure, Zelos had taught the boys how to survive in a harsh environment where their lives were on the line. But the way they were building on that to form some weird new ideology? That wasn't on him, he thought.

Maybe you could say that made him irresponsible. But at the end of the day, it was the boys who'd made that decision for themselves. They'd gotten something he hadn't been expecting out of his lessons.

They were chanting, now: "All for one, and one for all!"

It brought to mind a certain few musketeers.

Would these boys end up going down as great men in history, or head down a path of extremism and terrorism? Their fates were in their own hands.

"Sir Lavueriiiiin! Hold meeeeeee!"

There was a certain creep mixed in with the boys too. Zelos was trying his best to ignore him, but...it was too late. The sight of an older man quee-ing at a young noble boy, snot dripping from his nose, a look of sheer ecstasy on his face, had already been seared into a corner of his brain.

Hoping to forget about it as soon as he could, Zelos did the only thing that came to mind: he left as quickly as possible.

Shortly after, he ate a meal in the camp, retreated to his tent, and proceeded to sleep like a log.

It was like his body was trying its best to erase the memory from his mind...

Chapter 13: The Old Guy Gets Sidetracked

“Why are we in the middle of the forest? I bet the camp’s serving up some really good food...”

“Don’t ask *me*! If you’ve got anything to say, say it to Samtrol!”

“I hate to agree with *Zweit*, but...I guess he was right when he said Samtrol was naive, huh? We don’t even have any food except for some emergency rations. Besides, are we sure these assassin guys are even gonna turn up?”

These boys—part of the bloodline supremacist faction—had split from the main student group on the way into the Ramaf Woods, taking a longer, more roundabout route that had brought them to the far side of the academy’s campsite. And now that they were there, they were setting up a base of their own.

They were meant to be in charge of guiding assassins sent by a group called Hydra, but they didn’t have any particular plan; they were kind of just winging it. They hadn’t brought any proper food—or *most* things they needed to set up camp, for that matter.

They had a tent and some emergency rations, at least, but the latter of those wouldn’t last long. It really wasn’t a great plan.

Samtrol was the one who’d decided on the rendezvous point, and the others had just followed along. They hadn’t even thought about why they were following Samtrol’s orders in the first place. Or...perhaps it was more accurate to say they *couldn’t* think about it.

The effects of Bremait’s magic had left them unable to go against the plan.

Usually, magic like his had to be constantly reinforced with more mana-laden words, or the effect would start to wear off and eventually disappear. But for better or worse, it didn’t seem like these boys would be breaking free from its effect anytime soon.

“They’re here... Huh? What the—”

The boys were looking at their “guests,” who were walking over toward them. The first was a girl, dressed in pink, Eastern-style clothes. The second, a boy wearing knight’s armor. And the third, a woman, who wore a black evening dress covered by an equally black cloak, but still managed to look incredibly gaudy and nouveau riche thanks to the flashy jewelry that covered her from head to toe.

Put simply, they looked like a ragtag bunch of oddballs. Hardly what you’d expect from assassins.

“Hey, Samtrol... Is this really gonna be okay?”

“Who knows? Apparently they’ve got the skills, though.”

The woman in the black dress gave a friendly smile as she walked the rest of the way over to Samtrol and his cronies.

“Sorry we’re late~! To tell you the truth, we got a little bit lost. Really, though, who asks a woman to meet up with him in the middle of the wilderness? A real man ought to be more considerate, you know?”

“Quiet! Just do the job we tell you to do. Anyway... What’s up with *those* two?”

“They’re my guards. Reinhardt and little Nobody. Be nice to them, okay?”

“Are you screwing with us? If you go around looking like *that*, you’re gonna stand out like crazy!”

“Oh, but we’re *strong*! Strong enough to kill the lot of *you*, at least. Aha ha ha.”

How these assassins looked was one thing; hearing how strong they apparently were made the boys pale in an instant.

Sure, the three of them looked bizarre, but all of those bizarre things they were wearing were top-notch pieces of gear. So much so that a destitute, shady group like the bloodline supremacists wouldn’t have a hope of ever affording them.

A lot of what they were wearing seemed to be magic tools too—and by the looks of them all, selling even one would be enough to let you live life easy for a

few years.

“Hey, Sharanla... All these dudes here look about the same age as I am. Are they seriously the ones that gave us this stupid job? What a pain in the ass. I mean, I guess I’m fine with it if it gets me my freedom, though.”

“They *are* the ones who gave us the job, yes. A bunch of silly little children who just told us to go and *kill*, with no plan whatsoever. Honestly, they’re so stupid I almost feel sorry for them—do they really think they can just off the son of a duke without getting their own heads chopped off sooner or later? But, well... Work’s work, I suppose.”

“Sounds hard. I’ll do it if I get to eat, though...”

“Looks like you’re perfectly fine being asked to kill people, hmm? You make a good point, though—we don’t really have a choice if we’re getting paid for it, do we? Anyway, what’s the situation with the target? How many guards does he have?”

Sharanla was just trying to get an idea from Samtrol of how Zweit was guarded...but he and the others all responded with the same awkward expression, hemming and hawing like they had something stuck in their throats.

“What’s the problem? I’m asking you, how many guards does he have? Surely you aren’t going to tell me you haven’t even found that out?”

“Well, the thing is, uh... It’s a bit of a weird situation. The only *guards* he has are two mercenaries that the academy hired, but the area around him’s kinda being protected by some annoying...animals? And they’re *real* strong.”

“What do you mean, ‘annoying animals’?”

“Ah... Well. You probably won’t believe me, but they’re... They’re wild coccos...”

“*What?*”

Wild coccos were on the weaker side, as far as monsters came. They could get stronger, sure, but only by evolving—or so the general wisdom went. They really weren’t seen as the sort of monsters that skilled fighters should have to worry about.

Yet despite that, Samtrol and the others had some very worried looks on their faces. They all seemed like they were at their wits' end.

"Pfft... What, you guys can't even win against a buncha little birds? *Lame.*"

"Sh-Shut up! If they were just your average wild coccos, even I could kill them without any problems! But these are different!"

"More than half the bandits we hired are dead. It was a massacre..."

"Those things *have* to be some kinda subspecies or mutants or something! They're *way* stronger than they should be..."

"Yeah. Those things were crazy. No way they were just coccos!"

As soon as Reinhardt made light of the bloodline supremacists for failing to deal with the birds, they all snapped back at once. The situation was getting more and more confusing.

On one hand, you had the students, who for some reason were all trembling as they talked about a few birds...and on the other, you had a pink ninja girl, listening with a gleam in her eyes.

"If you think we're lying—look. I have a magic tool here. I'll show you."

Samtrol took out a crystal ball, and footage of the scene he was talking about was projected in midair.

It was a magic tool known as a Chronoseal Orb, and it worked something like a digital camera. It was a relic from ancient times, of course.

What it showed was three chickens annihilating a gang of bandits without mercy. They were moving so quickly that your eyes couldn't even keep up, and if you looked away for a mere moment, you'd look back to see that bandits were suddenly flying through the air, killed by a single hit.

Sharanla and Reinhardt were left with their jaws wide open.

"What the hell is *this*? You're kidding me, right? No way coccos are this strong..."

"Seems like they'll be quite the hassle. Long-distance stealth attacks, physical attacks, slashing attacks, the lot... Those bandits weren't even a match for

them. Just what level *are* those things?”

The cocos were using all sorts of different moves too, making it hard to get a grasp on what exactly they were doing. Plus, not only were they highly maneuverable—but they could soar through the sky as well. There was no way of knowing where their next attack would come from.

“We probably should assume they’re about as strong as we are, then. And if there’s some tamer in charge of them, who knows how strong *they* might be...”

“There’s gotta be one. No way you could handle those damn things without a tamer.”

“The birdies are cool... ≡”

It looked like there’d been about sixty bandits. It was frankly spectacular watching that many of them lose—more than half of them dying horribly in the process—to just three little birds.

The cocos looked invincible. Seeing the footage wouldn’t exactly make anyone eager to take them on.

“Shit, these things are bad news. Something’s clearly wrong with ‘em.”

“Based on what we’ve just seen, our only chance might be to get the target alone. Fortunately, though, I have just the tool for that. So I suppose we’ll have to make that work and get him alone, whatever it takes.”

“What’re we gonna do if those birds pop out, though? I don’t wanna have to deal with *that!*”

“The target himself isn’t all that strong, right? Probably about the same as the brats over there. So we just have to finish him off with a single attack, before they can get there. Easy.”

“Right... Yeah, everyone in this world seems super weak for some reason. Should be an easy win if we can time everything right.”

They’d figured out a general plan, but there were still too many unknowns for them to be sure of anything.

The exact strength of the cocos was one such unknown. And then there was the chance that they had a tamer nearby—in which case, there was no telling

how strong *they* might be.

At the very least, the assassins had to assume any such tamer would be stronger than the birds themselves. But they didn't have much information to go off.

"If you can, I want you to put the other students in some danger too. Then we'll swoop in and save them."

"Ah, I get it. So you want to make yourself look good, is that it? Are you sure you'll be able to make it work, though?"

"You lot just do what we tell you to do. That's what we're paying you for, isn't it?!"

"Well, hasn't *someone* got a big opinion of himself! How about *you* do it? You'll never get anywhere in life if you just rely on other people for everything, you know?"

"Shut up! Just get out there and do it!"

"Do you really think we'll do whatever you say if you just shout at us loudly enough? There's nothing forcing us to listen to you. In fact, I could kill you right now, and I'm pretty sure I'd get away with it without a problem..."

"Ngh..."

Samtrol's back was against the wall. In his mind, if he didn't take this opportunity to improve his reputation, he wouldn't be able to properly take over the Wiesler faction like he wanted to. Of course, he'd yet to realize that it was already too late for that; his greed was blinding him to the truth. It was very much in character for him, really—but the point was, he hadn't even considered that that greed could be his fatal downfall.

He had no idea that the master of these cocos was on a whole other level of strength. And no way of knowing, of course, that that very same man was Zweit's teacher to boot.

Sometimes, a lack of information could really screw you over. And Sharanla's group was probably better at that sort of information gathering.

The wheels of the plot were quietly turning, though—and they couldn't be

stopped anymore.

*

“Ahh... What a lovely morning.” Zelos stretched. “I slept well. My back hurts a little, though...”

“Teach? Have you seriously been sleeping the whole time since you got back to camp yesterday?”

“Well, I *did* pull an all-nighter. The kids who were with me probably still can’t move, so I guess I’ll be free today... That being the case, how about I guard you for a bit, Zweit?”

“Wait—don’t tell me you pushed your group like that just so you’d get some time to guard me?”

“No, no. I did it because there was this one brat with a head too big for his own good. I just wanted to teach him a lesson, that’s all.”

“Oh, yeah. I thought it’d be something like that. So, what—did you go back to being how you were ‘back then’ again?”

“Mmm... You see, I’m not sure why, but whenever I go into a forest, my mind ends up going down a bit of a dangerous path...”

It had been a day since Zelos had returned to the camp. But as he had expected, the boys who’d been with him still couldn’t move, so the group would have to rest for the whole day, whether they wanted to or not.

That being the case, Zelos had some time to kill—so he figured he’d use it to go gathering in the forest. Of course, there was also the matter of guarding Zweit to consider, so Zelos would be on alert nearby...but he wasn’t going to just sit around waiting for an attack to come. It was too mentally draining to do that forever, especially if you didn’t know when your opponent might attack you.

And so he intended to take a stroll around the Ramaf Woods—just without getting *too* far from Zweit.

“Thinking about those bandits that tried to attack us... You think they’ll try to do something again, Teach? Since their first attack failed, wouldn’t they usually

decide it's too risky to try again?"

"Today and tomorrow will be their only chances. And it'd be suicidal for them to try and attack the camp, so if they're going to try something, I'd say it'll probably be today. Whoever's pulling the strings is going to pick the day with the best chance of succeeding, I bet."

"Do you think they might give up on trying something during the training camp and attack the academy instead? I feel like they might be able to do that if they had someone guiding them."

"It'd be easy for people to spot them at the academy, and the security would be too tight for them to get into the dorms. So that's actually the riskier option for them. Plenty of people there too—and besides, the conspirators would probably want to keep their faces a secret. So no, I don't think they'd try and sneak into the academy."

Before the camp, Zelos had looked through documents about the academy to try and figure out any weak spots assassins might use. But both the academy and the dormitories, he'd found, were fitted with magic tools that essentially worked as alarms, and even if you used magic to break in, you'd be dealt with by force. In other words, even just breaking in could be incredibly dangerous. It was what you'd expect from a magic academy with such a long history.

Plus, there was no way the presumed heir to the Duchy of Solistia was going to be without guards. So if you considered the risks, it seemed like killing him in this forest would be the far safer option.

"Still, it's exhausting having to stay on my guard for enemies when we don't even know what they'll try and pull. I just wanna take a breather, dammit..."

"Well, the magic tools I made should buy you some time. But yes, it's not like those alone will be enough to keep you completely safe. If you run into anyone, send me the distress signal ASAP."

"I will. I don't plan to do anything risky, but I might end up fighting if that's what I have to do to protect myself..."

"Your top priority is staying alive. If you can't run away, then just buying time is probably your best bet. And I'll take it from there. By which I mean, I don't

intend on letting any of them leave alive...”

“Jeez! You’re kinda scaring me.”

Back in *Swords & Sorceries*, Zelos had always been ruthless against gankers.

And he’d been even more inhumane with his retaliation against anyone who used dirty tactics in an effort to kill other players and take their gear.

Speaking of which, a certain nasty magic tool he’d used in those situations was still knocking around in his inventory somewhere...

“I wonder whether I’ll end up using *that*? I *would* appreciate the opportunity to see how well it works... Hmm.”

“Teach? You’re not planning on using some kinda crazy magic tool against them when they attack, are you?”

“Ah, no... Well, technically, I’d be using it after I capture them. ♪ You see, this thing I have, it boosts your physical strength by a huge amount, right? But eventually, as you keep fighting, a bit of magic sealed inside it gets activated, and...*boom*. You explode. It attracts monsters to you too. Oh, and you can’t unequip it. Anyway, it’s just a little toy I made with some of my party members in the past.”

“Uh... You sure that isn’t one of those cursed item things that people talk about sometimes? And...why do you sound so excited?”

“Well, I do want to test it out a bit, so it’d be nice having some criminals as guinea pigs. That way I don’t have to feel guilty about whatever happens... Heh heh heh.”

“*Damn*, you’re a sadist... I feel bad for whoever you go up against.”

Zelos had already gone into Destroyer mode.

He hadn’t even seen these enemies yet, so he was counting his chickens before they’d hatched...but at the same time, he did have a four-digit level. It was hard to imagine that there’d be any assassin capable of taking him on.

Zelos’s real problem was that he still didn’t have a perfect grasp of his own power, so he might end up accidentally killing someone with a single light attack. And if the attackers were all dead after their fight, he wouldn’t get to

have his *playtime* afterward. Watching out for that was going to be the hard part.

“Even if I attack them kind of lazily, they could still die from one hit if they’re weak enough... I suppose I should be using Hold Back right from the start. Yeah. Do that, take control of the fight, tie them up, heal them, force them to equip all sorts of prototypes... Heh heh heh. Ahhh, this takes me back...”

“Uh... Teach? You’ve got a really evil look on your face right now.”

“Huh? Do I? Well, *that’s* no good. Poker face, Zelos, poker face...”

Zelos had no mercy for evildoers. Of course, he was lacking the awareness that he was a huge threat to society himself.

All he was able to think about right now was how to render his enemies powerless—and then, how to *punish* them. He was clearly enjoying the process...enough to really creep Zweit out.

“You sure you’re not looking forward to being attacked...? Even more than those coccas of yours?”

That’s not the case at all, Zelos wanted to say...but at the same time, he couldn’t help but start feeling a little awkward about it.

He realized Zweit was right: somewhere in his heart, there was a part of him that *was* looking forward to it. Unable to deny it, he just looked away from Zweit, trying to play it off.

He was no longer “the Zelos from back then.” He was “Zelos, the Black Destroyer.”

*

Zweit’s party was heading back into the forest.

Leveling up was an essential part of becoming an excellent member of society. And of course, how many levels the students gained on this camp would factor into the grade they got from their teachers, so those who’d managed to somewhat recover from their exhaustion were forced to head back out into the forest.

After all, the ones forced to take part in this camp were the students at the

extremes of the academy: the top achievers, and their opposites, the underperformers. Students with middling grades were free to decide whether they wanted to take part or not.

The underperformers were desperate to improve their grades, while the top achievers had to be nurtured so they could become potential future leaders of the Order of Mages. Usually, it would've been more effective to have brilliant teachers giving lectures, and students broken up into different classes so that they could each be provided with lessons from an appropriate curriculum...but most of the teachers at their academy were mages who had themselves gotten middling grades back in the day. In a sense, you could say the top-achieving students were smarter than their teachers were.

The managers at the academy were constantly torn between all sorts of different demands from faction leaders and nobles. So when it came to helping the students level up, they'd failed to agree on any sort of effective plan. Ultimately, they'd ended up just going with the easiest option...which was this combat training camp. From there, they'd made completely baseless assertions about the event's safety—*we'll hire mercenaries to guard the students, so they'll be perfectly fine*—and just left all the rest to the mercenaries' guild, with no further regard for how safe their students would *actually* be. It wasn't the most responsible way of going about things.

At the same time, it was hard to blame the teachers for all that. They were constantly having unreasonable demands forced onto them by their higher-ups, and there was no shortage of teachers whose bodies had broken down from the sheer stress of it all. They were worried that if they got on the bad side of their higher-ups, there would be strings pulled behind the scenes that'd leave them unable to even live a normal life—so as things were, the teachers had no choice but to form an alliance that transcended faction boundaries and try their best to reach a compromise on every matter that came up.

Fortunately—if you could call it that—they'd managed to maintain the academy's reputation so far. And it *was* true that the place still managed to churn out reasonably competent mages.

It was a little sad, though, that the students were clueless about everything that went on behind the scenes at their own academy. They had no choice but

to simply accept whatever happened there as if it was the natural way of things. And even if they *had* known, they couldn't have done much to change it—they were too busy with lecture after lecture, event after event. In short...nothing was changing.

This was how the academy had been run up until now, and it had generally worked out, so you could see why its management had started to think, *Let's just leave it all to the mercenaries' guild again.*

Schools were always under all sorts of external pressures about how to teach their children; it was the same in every world. But now, there was the risk that this event might not end quite as smoothly as it had in previous years.

Zweit sighed. "So today's the day, huh? Can't say I'm looking forward to it..."

"You worried about something, Zweit?" Diio asked. "Don't know whether I'd be able to help you with it or not, but I can at least hear you out if you want."

"Yeah... Just worrying about what Samtrol and his idiots are gonna try and pull. I know he's scurrying around with the rest of the bloodline supremacists trying to do *something*, but I don't have a clue what it'll be."

"The bloodline supremacists, huh? Yeah, they're a real bunch of elitists, aren't they? All they've got is a little bit of special magic they're born with; it's not even that strong. But they sure think it makes them better than everyone else."

"*Some* people have useful bloodline magic, but most of *them* work for some kind of agency that answers to the king. The rest are just idiots who think they can take credit for what the few competent bloodline mages achieve, and it makes them all arrogant... I can't deal with those bastards."

"Yeah. Where do they get off bragging about what other people have done? People deserve credit for their own achievements, right? I just think it's really...brazen of them."

"They probably *need* to cling to other people's achievements if they don't wanna end up depressed. Since it's not like they've achieved anything to be proud of themselves. Not like their flawed magic would help them much with that anyway."

There *were* some bloodline mages with powerful magic.

That said, those bloodline mages generally belonged to an intelligence agency directly under the king, or had some other sort of special role along those lines. They were paid well too, and treated well to boot. But they had to deal with nuisances who clung to their achievements in an attempt to grow their own faction.

Frankly, the high achievers found those pretenders to be nuisances. The former tried their best to distance themselves from the latter, but they'd inevitably find their names being used without permission to prop up some cause or another anyway—damaging their reputations in the process.

Seeing the bloodline supremacists go unpunished for their ludicrous attempts to claim someone else's deeds as their own, the high achievers would frequently come to the Order of Mages saying, *Do something about them, please! They're using my name without permission! Why do I have a tab at taverns I've never been to?! Taverns! Plural!* In short, they had some real complaints—or requests, or demands, or whatever else you wanted to call them.

The people using their names might not have had a talent for magic, but they sure had a talent for being audacious.

“In a sense, it's the perfect faction for Samtrol. Not that the bloodline supremacists are an actual, proper faction, mind you...”

“Well, yeah. I think bloodline magic's like a lot of things—it just comes down to how you use it. But people hate most of them because they don't even *try* to look into the best ways to use what they've got; they just leech off other people. I bet they're a huge nuisance for the bloodline mages who've actually put in the hard work and found success.”

“For sure. The successful bloodline mages try to swat the supremacists away, but the supremacists just go straight back to buzzing around them... Of course you'd get fed up with that.”

The bloodline supremacist faction was something like a bunch of terrorist wannabes.

They believed that they were the true, legitimate mages, and looked down on anyone else. The way they acted so superior without even having anything to

back it up with made them irritating to no end, and they didn't hesitate to put other people down in order to make themselves look superior.

They were even fine with *killing* people who opposed them—and they had underworld connections to help with just that, so they could be a troublesome bunch to deal with. Unfortunately, they had ties with bloodline supremacists from other countries too. For a faction, they were small, but for a shady organization, they were on the larger side.

“Sooner or later, they always end up calling for some ‘return to the glory of the ancient times’ or whatever, but... I mean, according to the old history books, they were just the failed result of some magic experiments. They’re descended from criminals, y’know?”

“But they don’t admit that, right? They say they’re descended from the nobles of an ancient magic civilization or something.”

“Yeah. Besides, the ancient times were apparently democratic, so there wouldn’t have even been any royals or nobles anyway.”

“So not only do they not know their history, but they’re also just blindly believing what’s most convenient for them. Not that them being stupid makes them any less annoying to deal with. I definitely get why Samtrol ended up joining them...”

“Yeah. He’s supposed to have good grades, but I don’t believe it. Rumor says he pulls some strings to get his grades faked—there’s nothing to prove it, though.”

What was written in the few surviving books from back then proved that the ancient magic civilization had been a democracy. But the bloodline supremacists refused to accept that, believing it was just a hoax perpetuated by the current royalty—and most of the other nobles.

Annoyingly, one of the four gods had apparently given a divine revelation to a user of bloodline magic at some point; that had made the bloodline supremacists increasingly arrogant, only further adding to the chaos. Since then, bloodline mages had attempted a rebellion about once every century, and it had ended in tragedy every time.

“Hey, Zweit. Probably not a big deal, but...make sure you’re keeping your eye on your surroundings.”

“Oh. Right. My bad. I got kinda carried away talking.”

“I don’t think an idiot like Samtrol would be able to do much, but letting your guard down too much could still get you hurt. Maybe even killed.”

Heeding his companion’s warning, Zweit turned his eyes toward his surroundings.

There weren’t any monsters in sight, but this *was* their habitat, a place where all sorts of wild creatures competed in the struggle for existence. The slightest lapse of attention could prove fatal.

Wild beasts could sometimes hide themselves for an ambush, or use their sense of smell to determine how far away you were. There could even be something lurking in the shadows at this very moment, seeing them as prey, keeping a vigilant eye on them and waiting for an opportunity to strike.

“Huh? Do you guys...smell something? It’s kinda sweet...”

“What are you saying, Diio? I can’t really notice anything.”

“No, it’s definitely there. Something sort of sweet, being carried by the wind... What is it?”

“It’s just a smell. You’re overreacting. Remember, we’re after *monsters*.”

Diio had noticed some kind of smell in the breeze, but most of his companions were brushing him off. Zweit turned to the wind and sniffed to try and confirm it himself, and...yes. There it was. It was faint, but there *was* some kind of smell.

He didn’t feel any need to be *too* on guard because of a smell, but it was triggering an itch in a corner of his mind. As he thought about it, he remembered: there were various types of smells you had to watch out for in the forest, but broadly speaking, the main ones were some kind of charm effect, or something that attracted monsters.

Hmm... I think Teach said something about this before. That if there’s a sweet smell, it’s probably either attracting monsters, or it can charm you... Was that it? I think some monster related to the man-eater was able to do something like

that... Wait. A man-eater?!

That was when it clicked. There was a certain something called felscent—a concoction that attracted monsters, made using man-eater petals.

“Crap! Guys, get as far away from here as you can!”

“Huh? What are you *saying*, Zweit?”

“It’s just a bit of a sweet smell! Why are you so worried about it?”

“Because it might be felscent, you idiots! You know? That thing that attracts monsters!”

“What?!”

Felscent had a characteristic sweet smell, as well as the ability to send monsters into a state of excitement. Usually, each monster would only react to the pheromones of its own species, but there was one monster and one monster alone—something called the “lilith man-eater”—that could have a potent effect on most other monsters. Felscent, which was made with its petals, was a powerful concoction, and spreading some around the place would attract most monsters to the area, with just a handful of exceptions.

Of course, the danger it posed meant you needed explicit approval to use it. If you just started suddenly scattering it around the place, you’d be guilty of a major crime; that alone would be enough for your head to roll.

Every country had strict laws around its handling, and it wasn’t easy to get your hands on some.

“What the *hell*?! Is that Samtrol asshole seriously using *that*?!”

“Save the complaints for later! For now, just get outta here!”

“Right! I swear, when I get my hands on him...”

All at once, the party broke out into a run toward the campsite.

If they stayed here, they’d be surrounded by monsters in no time; that much was obvious. And however much they’d leveled up on this trip so far, they’d stand no chance against that many monsters swarming all over them. So for now, their top priority was getting somewhere even just a little bit safer.

But Zweit, and Zweit alone, didn't run. No... He *couldn't* run.

"Wha—?!"

All of a sudden, his body felt...heavy. He keeled over, collapsing onto the ground.

"Zweit?!"

Noticing something was wrong, Diio turned around to look. But his vision was obstructed, like there was suddenly a thick white fog in the way.

"What is this? A... A barrier? No! Don't tell me it's a...*boundary*?!"

"Diio! Just run!"

"But... Zweit! What about you?!"

"I'll manage! If there's a boundary, it means I should be safe inside."

"B-But... This is obviously a..."

"Don't worry. I've got a card up my sleeve for times like this. Anyway, keep an eye out! Monsters are coming."

"*Ngh*... I'll come back to save you! I promise, okay?! Just stay safe until then!"

With a heavy heart, Diio turned away from Zweit and ran.

Once Zweit had watched Diio leave, he released the mana stored inside the ring he'd received from Zelos.

Now, Zelos would be able to know where he was.

"Huh. It...kind of feels like there's something on my back..."

He remembered his body suddenly feeling heavy, and he remembered collapsing to the ground. But now that he thought back on it with a clearer head, he'd also felt an *impact*, followed by something weighing down on his back. And that weight was still there now.

He tried to look over his shoulder to check, and...there it was. He was sure he hadn't been carrying anything on his back, but a faint, transparent *something* was there on it now, gradually coming into view.

A swirl of colors started to coalesce into a clearer form, and finally, he could

tell what he was looking at: a girl, wearing what looked like Eastern clothes.

So...there was a girl on his back. He was practically giving her a piggyback ride.

“Uh... Who are *you*?”

“*Blegh.*”



“So?”

“That was my ninja art. Konaki-jiji. What do you think?”

“Uh... What am I supposed to say to that? I don’t even know what you’re talking about...”

Silence ensued.

The two of them were just staring at each other. It was awkward.

A magic tool would only work once the user released the magic that had been stored inside it.

Even a magic tool made to automatically protect you from attacks wouldn’t be able to do anything unless you activated it first; it was a drawback of all magic tools. They were the same as electronics: you had to switch them on before they’d do anything.

Zweit hadn’t released the mana from the amulet Zelos had given him, so it hadn’t taken effect to defend him—leaving him vulnerable to this surprise attack. But more so than any *danger*, Zweit just wanted to do something about this awkward atmosphere.

The two of them continued to stare at each other, silent. It was a weird atmosphere—one like neither of them had ever felt before.

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Just a little earlier, Zelos had been walking along not far behind Zweit’s party. But...

“I’m lost. I was just collecting some medicinal herbs, but now... Hmm. What should I do?”

Of all the times to get separated...

Looking around to get his bearings, Zelos realized he was in a rocky area. But beyond that, he didn’t have a clue where he was.

“Well. Now what? I don’t think I’ll be able to use my mask to find out where Zweit is unless he activates that ring I gave him... Should I try it out just in case? And I guess if I have to, I’ve got *that* up my sleeve— Hmm?”

As Zelos looked out over the rocks, he was distracted by something shiny.

It seemed like it was the shine from a mineral or something, but he wouldn't know for sure unless he dug it out. He didn't waste a moment in pulling out a pickaxe and swinging it down toward the rock.

The sound of the rock smashing into pieces echoed out across the area.

"This is...manadite ore. I'll be able to use this in a magic tool... Oh, and here's a flare sapphire! I could turn it into a magic gem for powering up fire magic."

Zelos started mining with glee. He had the blood of a crafter flowing through his veins, and he couldn't go against it.

And now that he'd started, there was no stopping. The swings of his pickaxe grew faster and faster, harder and harder, until eventually it was like he was using a *jackhammer* to bore holes into the rocks.

He cast magic to pile up the ores from the shattered rocks, and used Appraisal to tell what they were. He found that most of them were iron ore, but there was the occasional rare mineral in there—gems, or mana crystals, or so on.

And so played out the rather surreal sight of Zelos, still dressed like a priest covered in black from head to toe, mining with a pickaxe.

"Mana crystals, eh? I guess I should be able to make an artificial spirit crystal by soaking them in spirit water and compressing them. Still, a natural spirit crystal would be better... Maybe I could use them for some ether culture instead? Hmm, it's hard to say..."

You could make an artificial spirit crystal by sealing elemental mana inside a mana crystal, but it wouldn't be quite as effective as a *natural* spirit crystal. Ether culture, meanwhile, could be used to cultivate a homunculus, and you made it by melting down the mana crystal and mixing it with several potion ingredients.

Seeing as mana naturally dissipated and spread by itself, you wouldn't usually need a culture setup that provided a constant supply of mana. But Zelos had already started making one.

"If I want to extract the spirit essence from Kaede's hair, it probably *would* be

better if I used a natural one. And while I haven't tried it before, I should be able to do the same thing with the Dark God Stone. Regardless, at the very least, I think I'll be needing two large spirit crystals... And the natural ones are rare."

Back when Zelos had gone into the abandoned mine, he'd managed to gather a lot of good ores. But *this* place was letting him get a good haul of crystals, which would be good media to use in alchemy. Mercenaries were obliged to report these kinds of discoveries to the mercenaries' guild, but... Well, Zelos wasn't exactly too diligent about his job as a mercenary.

"The more materials, the better, I guess. Maybe I *will* even come across a natural spirit crystal here... All right! I'm getting pumped! *Aaaaaah ha ha ha!*"

Zelos had fallen back into an old habit from when he'd played *Swords & Sorceries*; he got back to mining in a great mood, and started smashing up rocks by swinging his pickaxe to the beat of an anime song, singing loudly as he went. He was really being careless. And he hadn't even realized the drawback of the magic tools he'd made; he was just completely absorbed in gathering the materials he'd need for the little plan he'd been putting together in secret.

Engrossed in mining as he was, he had no idea.

No idea that Zweit was falling into the hands of the enemy...

Extra Chapter: The Children Chase Their Dreams

Five children were talking among themselves in a storage room underneath an old church.

One boy's face was covered in scratches. He was Johnny—the leader of this group.

Usually, he had a cheeky tone and seemed every bit a child—like he was growing up slower than most. But here, now, his behavior was unusually mature.

He cast his eyes over his four companions and began to speak.

“Now... We've gotten some work lately, and we've managed to save up some money. I think it's time for the next part of our plan.”

“Yeah. We want to get as much gear together as we can—the more we get, the easier everything after that'll be.”

Laddie, a boy with a crew cut, was also speaking differently from usual.

They were followed by Ange, a redheaded girl, and Kai, a chubby boy:

“Mmm... Still, we can get all the gear in the world, but we don't know anything apart from the sword skills Kaede's taught us, y'know?”

“Yeah. Mercenaries need to be good if they wanna rise up the ranks. And about all we can do is snatch some wallets, so...”

The kids were growing up in the same orphanage—and they were companions, all chasing after the same dream.

Up until a few years ago, they'd been street urchins, surviving by pickpocketing and scavenging through garbage. They didn't even know their own parents' faces, trusting no one but their fellow orphans. Like stray dogs, they lived their lives in fear. But one day, they'd been caught by guards and left in the care of an orphanage.

Since then, they'd all taken a vow to not cause trouble for Luceris, their foster

mother—and their scurrying around in secret now was part of a plan to that end.

“Mm... My deepest apologies. If only I were more skilled myself...”

“Nah. Your sword lessons are really helping out, Kaede. I just feel like it’d be even better if we could do more than just that, y’know? So we could deal with whatever we came up against. Like...by using magic or something.”

“Magic? But those ‘spell scroll’ things are rather expensive, are they not?”

Kaede, a high elf girl wearing a kimono with a red hakama, had been the last member to join this group. She had such a battle-obsessed personality that you’d struggle to believe she was an elf, and she was making the most of her excellent combat skills to help out the group by teaching swordsmanship to Johnny and the others.

“Magic, huh...? You reckon Pops’d teach us some if we asked him?”

“He might, but... It’d be kinda scary to ask him, right? What’re you gonna do if he suddenly drags us out to the Far-Flung Green Depths and calls it ‘training,’ Ange?”

“Aww... You’re such a worrywart, Laddie! C’mon, even Pops wouldn’t go *that* far...”

The orphans got along with a certain mage who lived on the plot of land just behind the church, and they’d heard a fair bit about the Far-Flung Green Depths and the dangers within.

They’d also been gathering information bit by bit every time they headed into the main part of the city. And they’d been consulting with each other, thinking about what they should all do with themselves when they grew up. Eventually, they’d come to an answer: they were going to be mercenaries.

Mercenaries were constantly moving from city to city, making a living by slaying monsters or guarding clients. They didn’t exactly lead affluent lives, though.

A mercenary’s equipment, for starters, could be expensive—not just to buy, but also to maintain. And that was far from the only expense of the job. You

had to consider travel costs too, and food, and lodging, and healing potions for when you got hurt, and all *sorts* of other stuff. Not to mention the up-front costs, like a tent and a set of portable cookware... Long story short, the kids were short on cash.

They knew all that. But even then, they had their reasons for pursuing such a difficult job...

“It’s all about the dungeons. If you wanna get rich quick, it’s gotta be dungeons.”

“But you need a pretty high guild rank and a good rep before they’ll even let you into them, right? I dunno if it’d be that easy for us to do that by ourselves... I mean, we’re already starting off right from the bottom.”

“You’ve got a point, Kai. We haven’t got any of the basics you need to be mercenaries. So first thing’s first: we’ll have to get strong enough that we can become independent and not cause people any trouble.”

“So we’re getting ahead of ourselves, is that what you’re saying...? I guess we could do something about magic if we saved up enough money to buy some scrolls, but...who should we get to teach us stuff other than sword-fighting? I mean, Pops is a *mage*, so...”

“Sir Zelos is skilled in areas other than magic as well. Overwhelmingly so, in fact. Should we be careless with him, we could find ourselves dead.”

“Is Pops really that strong? He just looks like some shady old guy, though...”

Laddie was being rude.

If Luceris were here, she’d probably be getting mad at him right about now.

“By the way, Pops started keeping some wild coccos, didn’t he? Weirdly...*intimidating* ones, though.”

“That he did. And indeed, they are quite the formidable coccos. They provide me with some worthwhile training... Ah!”

Kaede had a sudden thought: why not have everyone train with the coccos?

The coccos Zelos had taken in were strong. The three named ones—Ukei, Zankei, and Senkei—were particularly so, and it was incredible watching them

train. Kaede had been joining in with them recently, and she was fully aware that taking them on was beyond this group of kids.

But leaving those three aside...what about the *other* coccos? Sure, even the weaker ones would still be stronger than your average adult. But mightn't that make them the perfect sparring partners to toughen up Johnny and the other orphans a bit? And so, she decided, the coccos would make for good rivals.

After all, as a group, they covered some of the key combat skills—slashing, striking, and shooting. And just knowing how to swing a sword wasn't enough to make you a proper mercenary. In certain situations, you might have to use a different weapon, and sometimes you might be without any weapon at all, so knowing how to fight barehanded was important too. From a certain perspective, these coccos might actually be the best training partners the orphans could hope for.

Plus, their owner was a mage. If the kids were lucky enough, he might even end up teaching them some magic while they were at it.

Kaede relayed her idea to Johnny on the spot.

“Seriously?! You’re telling us to learn from *coccos*?!”

“Yes. It may just be that we could find no better environment to train in. You see, while I am able to teach you the way of the sword, knowing that and that alone will make you unbalanced in a fight. I believe you should take the opportunity to learn more ways of taking on your foes, so that you may adapt to any situation.”

“But, I mean... It’s embarrassing, right? They’re *chickens*!”

“Would you prefer to be weak forever, then? We will all have to become independent someday. Only an incredible fool would simply throw away the opportunity to learn the basics of fighting. And what will your pride be worth if you end up dead as a result?”

Kaede made a very good point. Still, it seemed like the kids were embarrassed at the thought of learning the ways of combat from a bunch of chickens.

These coccos were *strong*, though. Strong enough to curb stomp your average mercenaries.

“Argh... Fine. Even if they *are* chickens, at least it sounds like they’ll be strong enough to give us some good practice. Now we just need to...get permission from Pops, I guess? And...wake up early in the mornings...”

“Ugh... *Really?* I’m seriously not a morning person, though...”

“We’ve gotta work in the field anyway, right? It’ll just mean we’re doing some training too while we’re at it. Anyway, that’s that. Let’s get a move on!”

While the group was a little reluctant to wake up early—apart from Kaede, who already did for her sword training—they resolved themselves to start doing just that. They *did* really need to learn how to fight.

All of them were still weighed down by memories of empty, hollow days. Of rotten food and gloomy alleyways.

They’d never be able to *forget* all that. But maybe, they thought, just maybe—if they could become even happier than they were now—they’d be able to leave it all behind them for good. All five had deep scars on their hearts, and those scars were driving them forward.

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About four years prior, Johnny was living in a dark alleyway.

Without even realizing it, he’d become part of a group at some point with Ange, Laddie, and some other kids who were in the same situation. They all worked under the same boss, and they were constantly being sent out to do something or another.

Kai and Kaede were yet to join at this point; they would come later. And for now, the group earned their keep by stealing.

Every day was hell. Johnny worked with Ange and the others to scope out street stalls and look for any that seemed vulnerable. They were, of course, looking for opportunities to pinch something, just so that they could eat. It was a battle to survive.

Sometimes they’d try to pickpocket wallets too, but they weren’t quite as successful at that.

If they were caught, they’d be beaten, then promptly thrown in jail. That was

the world they lived in.

They usually struck between early morning and noon. The street vendors started setting up for the day a little before sunrise and got really busy a little before noon. The short period between those times was when they aimed to strike.

After all, there weren't too many customers in that period—and the vendors would frequently doze off, still sleepy from having to wake up so early.

Sometimes there could be opportunities around noon, when the stalls were busy...but with the vendors wide awake and hard at work by then, there was a higher risk of getting caught. All of this thieving knowledge was stuff the orphans had been taught by their boss.

Their boss, in turn, was backed by bandits—and if any of the orphans became competent enough, they'd get to join the bandit group as underlings.

In short, the city streets were like a training ground for up-and-coming criminals.

That morning, just as any other, Johnny and his group were scoping out the street vendors, looking for an opportunity to steal something.

No chance, Johnny signaled to Ange and the others with a hand. *That one's no good.*

The orphans targeted stalls within a certain territory, and if they got the chance, they'd spring straight to action. They'd carefully planned out escape routes too, and they'd divvy up any stolen loot between them as they ran, evenly distributing the spoils to make it harder for the victims to get it all back. It was an old trick.

They'd never eaten any hot food. Just living was all they could barely manage.

Tch! Why are there so many people here today? Guess we gotta go for something else...

Every day, the orphans would split up into teams of three or four. There was a strict pecking order, with the boss at the top taking all of the loot for himself. Those at the bottom could do nothing but live their lives trembling in fear, just

hoping they didn't upset him.

That boss, mind you, was somewhere in his teens. No more than a small-time thug himself.

It always annoys me when he acts so arrogant. But for now, I've gotta worry about food.

If they wanted to live, they had to eat. Sometimes they'd manage to pick up a few coins, but that alone wasn't enough to stave off the hunger. Such a meager amount of money wouldn't last a day.

Johnny looked over each and every person walking through the street, occasionally stopping to see how a stall looked, as he tried to find the easiest mark. He found it strange, though, that there were so many more people passing through today than usual.

He couldn't exactly ask someone *why*, though. The orphans were hated by the residents of the city, and they knew it.

It wasn't as if the orphans *wanted* to live like this. But the city's residents saw them as nothing but obstructions to business—or sometimes, perhaps, as thieves who'd steal their wallets.

The kids, in turn, *had* to steal if they wanted to live. They were stuck, and they didn't know how to climb out. Sure, they *wanted* someone to save them, but it wasn't like there was anyone reaching out that helping hand.

The priests in the city preached that the gods, in their “eternal compassion,” would reach out and save the suffering. But whenever Johnny heard them, he couldn't help but shout back in frustration, calling them liars. *We're all suffering right now*, he and the others would think, *and there's no god saving us. There's no such thing!* That was the only way they could think.

And so, none of the orphans believed in the gods. They only knew one way of surviving to see the next morning, and that was to rely on *themselves*.

It makes me sick. What have the gods ever done for us? Nothing!

All the orphans wanted was a warm bed and a proper meal. It didn't have to be anything fancy. If it would simply stop them suffering from hunger, that was

all they could ask for.

They were incredibly envious of all the other kids their age who walked around town—living normal lives, eating as if it were a given, seeming not to suffer in the slightest. It was as if, by some mistake, the children had all been divided at birth between light and shadow, some sent to live on fertile land, others in a desert.

It was all just so *sickening*.

“I’m so hungry...”

But anger alone wouldn’t fill your stomach. If it did, Johnny and the others would be willing to get as angry as it took.

Reality was a harsh mistress, though. And so hungry they remained, worrying whether they’d even live to see the next sunrise.

Winter would be here soon. They had to save up food by then, or they’d die of starvation.

They’d already seen so many of their companions die in the alleyways. And their boss never gave a damn.

They died because they’re weak. Fucking idiots! That was his attitude. And, in fact, he’d actually *said* pretty much that.

A lot of the kids held grudges against him.

None of us’d be able to get revenge on him, though. Not the way we are now. I wanna get stronger...

It was the earnest wish of a weak young boy desperate to survive.

But the gods wouldn’t grant even that tiniest of wishes. And so, he had no choice but to struggle on in vain.

“Hm? That one’s good, is it?”

Johnny looked toward a stall surrounded by a throng of people.

He couldn’t tell what the stall was selling. But there were so many people milling around it that they could barely move—a perfect opportunity. He’d be going for the customers’ baskets. Or perhaps their wallets.

He narrowed his eyes, waiting for the perfect timing.

And there it was: a rough-looking man set his basket down on the ground.

He certainly didn't look like the kind of person who was out on a grocery run, but Johnny put his worries to rest, assuming he was some chef or something. Slowly, the boy approached the man's basket.

At the same time, he sent a sign to the other orphans, telling Ange and the others to get into position.

Johnny purposefully made a show of looking at what the stall had to offer—and then, just a moment later, he grabbed the basket and started sprinting away as fast as his legs could take him. He heard cries of “Thief!” coming from behind him, but he just ran into a back alley without once turning around to look, checking the contents of the basket as he ran.

A bit of food and a wallet, huh...?

Johnny threw the wallet over to Ange and the others, who were waiting ready to catch it.

Ange and Laddie ran with the wallet, while Johnny darted through a complex maze of back alleys to throw off his pursuers. As a child, there were plenty of places for him to hide.

Eventually, he found a wall with a hole too narrow for adults to fit in, squeezed through it, climbed a drain spout up to a roof, and ran along the rooftops.

All that was left now was to meet back up with the others.

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Once Johnny had met back up with Ange and Laddie, the three of them headed to the outskirts of the harbor, where all the others would be waiting.

As they walked, they took their time looking through the contents of the stolen basket and split a deep-fried pastry that was inside a bag between the three of them.

Their boss would just be taking everything they'd stolen anyway, so it only made sense for them to eat any food they'd gotten while they had the chance.

They pilfered a little bit out of the wallet too, figuring they'd save it for a rainy day.

The orphans could hardly trust their boss to take care of them, after all.

They were curious, though, about the fact that there was a ring inside the wallet. If it was a present, they thought, it normally would've been wrapped up. Certainly not just tossed haphazardly inside a wallet like this.

The life these orphans lived made them weirdly perceptive about this sort of thing.

Johnny had a hunch: this ring was bad news.

The orphans were to rendezvous at an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the harbor district. It had probably belonged to a fisherman at one point, but nowadays, it was completely deserted.

Sitting in the corner of that warehouse, reclining with the arrogance of a king, was a young man, surrounded by a handful of the older orphans—his underlings. They were all eating, and they seemed to be enjoying their meal.

Not far from them were younger orphans who looked like they could collapse from hunger at any moment. But the boys were making no moves to share their food.

If anyone starved to death, the boss and his cronies would just throw their dead bodies into the Aurus River without a second thought.

"Hey. Finally back, huh? So? What'd ya get today?"

The young man had a broad grin on his face. He had a knife at his waist; as much as some of the orphans might have *wanted* to fight him, they knew it wouldn't end well for them.

"Just a few vegetables and a wallet. Less than we thought it'd be. Should've gone for someone else."

"*Tch!* Useless little pricks. Well, whatever. Hand over the wallet."

The young man grabbed onto the stolen basket and rummaged through the contents.

“Hey. For a pretty fancy-looking wallet, there ain’t much inside it, don’tcha think? Ya didn’t steal any for yourself, did ya? Huh?”

“We were too focused on running away. You really think we’d have time to do something like that? The guys chasing us were damn stubborn. They just wouldn’t stop running after us.”

“Mm. We’ll see about that. Huh? What’s this—a ring?”

Johnny had given a barefaced lie, and he was playing stupid to follow it up.

If he talked back, he’d be beaten. He’d end up with nothing but bruises for his trouble. That was a bit of worldly wisdom he’d picked up from experience.

“So ya didn’t even check what was inside it, huh?”

“You know there’s no way we’d have time for that! They were chasing after us really hard. Probably because they wanted to get that ring back. We’re tired, you know?”

“Cheeky brat. Whatever. Ya stole me some money, so I’ll let it slide. It’s yer lucky day.”

That was the kind of person their boss was.

His followers tossed their bones when they’d finished eating, then watched, grinning like fools, as the orphans fought over each other for the scraps.

“Aha ha ha! Damn, they look pathetic!”

“We’ve got some money now, Mr. Jageera. C’mon, let’s go get some booze.”

“Yeah. We can just have the brats here steal us some more money when we run out, right? I’d feel bad for ’em if we didn’t keep ’em nice and busy!”

It was the first time Johnny had heard his boss’s name—not that it really mattered to him.

Johnny and his group quickly left.

They’d come back later to rest once the boss was asleep. Such was their usual routine.

The three of them sat by the bank of the Aurus River, trying to catch some fish to eat for dinner, as they talked about what they’d done earlier when they were

running away.

“For now, I’ve hidden the money in that spot I told you about.”

“They didn’t see your face, did they, Johnny? All our hard work’s gonna go to waste if they catch us!”

“You really think I’d screw up like that? Still, I guess we should get our food by fishing like this for a little bit.”

Their boss was a tyrant, but fortunately for them, he was also an idiot. He and his cronies all thought they were smart, but the orphans had managed to get away with swiping about a third of the wallet’s contents before they handed it over. After all, it was Johnny and his group who’d stolen it. The boss didn’t have any way of knowing how much had been inside.

At the end of the day, it wasn’t as if Jageera and his cronies actually *did* anything. So while they could have their suspicions, they didn’t have any way of actually proving them.

“Jeez, we’re getting nothing but mullids today, huh? They’re biting well, but they’re all we’re getting. And if we bring a big fish back with us, those guys are just gonna steal it away from us, aren’t they?”

“Yup...”

Johnny and the others worked their hardest to try and secure themselves some food for tomorrow, munching on some freshly caught grilled mullid as they did.

“I’m getting a bad vibe. It’s kinda giving me the chills.”

Johnny’s premonition was on the mark.

Shortly after they went to bed for the night, the abandoned warehouse was raided by guards.

All of a sudden, Johnny and his group were caught. The ring had apparently been a magic tool, planted in an attempt to catch the culprits behind the frequent thefts in the city. The orphans cursed their bad luck...though while they didn’t know it at the time, it might have been more like *good* luck.

Not that they had the luxury of being so optimistic at the time.

Over at the guardroom, the orphans were given some decent enough food to fill their bellies. Then they were loaded onto a carriage and taken to an orphanage in the city's south to be looked after.

There were some kids their age playing on playground equipment, and a nice, clean-looking building; it was like the very existence of the place was just *rejecting* how Johnny had lived his life up until now. And there was a priest looking after the kids there too.

It felt like he was being mocked for all the suffering he'd gone through.

For so long, he'd denied the existence of the gods; he just felt pissed off now to see priests, after all this time, suddenly reaching out a helping hand in the name of "the compassion of the gods." He'd seen plenty of his fellow orphans die before, and no one had saved *them*, so you couldn't blame him for his anger.

It was then that the person in charge of those priests appeared before Johnny.

"Glad to have you here, you stinkin' brats. This'll be your new home."

The old lady greeting the orphans certainly didn't *seem* like a priest.

She was holding a wine bottle in one hand, and it looked like she was already plastered.

To top it off, she was lazily chewing on a bit of jerky as she spoke. However much Johnny hated priests, even *he* had to ask himself, *Is this lady seriously a priest?*

"Listen up, kiddos. This world ain't got no gods. The only ones who can save people...are people. If just praying got you anywhere, *everyone'd* be happy by now."

She was saying some crazy stuff. The more she spoke, the less priestly she seemed.

"I bet you've all faced plenty of crap. Suffered a lot. But get this into your heads: don't go thinking about giving other people a taste of that suffering too.

You hear me? If you start doing that, you won't even be a person anymore. Just a pile of shit. Now that you're here, we'll bring you up all good and proper so you don't turn out like that. Well—just 'til you're adults, of course."

She had quite the foul mouth. But to Johnny, that made her far better than all those priests who spoke in empty platitudes.

The priests he'd seen around town had been perfectly good at sounding holy, but the moment they'd seen the orphans, scowls of contempt had come to their faces.

In contrast, the old lady here was showing no such expression. Johnny could tell—she was actually *looking* at them. Seeing them for who they were.

"Let's say you really *are* a priest, old lady. Should you really be sayin' that kinda stuff?"

The words had come tumbling out of Johnny's mouth before he'd even realized it. But the lady just responded with a bellowing laugh. "Eh, who cares? Not like the gods have ever saved anyone anyway. If you've got a chance to get saved by someone, you take it, however small it is."

It was about a year after that that Johnny, Ange, and Laddie were joined by Kai; and another six months later, Kaede.

Each of those five orphans had a slightly different dream, but it was the same at its core: a shared wish to never go back to those days of starvation.

That was why they were so obsessed with earning money.

Their sights were set on dungeons. On getting rich quick and leading a happy life, with a happy family.

It was the humble dream of a bunch of orphans with nothing to their names.

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It was early morning. Johnny and the others finished their work out in the fields, then headed to Zelos's house.

But when they arrived, they were shocked by what they saw.

"Bo-CAW!"

“Not on my watch!”

Before them was a flurry of powerful blows—or wing-punches, or whatever you wanted to call them—and shock waves, all so strong you could hardly believe they came from a *chicken*.

They clearly weren’t your average attacks.

“Training session” seemed like an understatement. *Whatever* you wanted to call it, though, it was a crazy brawl, that much was clear.

The space had become a world unto itself, a world of men among men, where violence was the law of the land.

“Uh... Is it okay for someone to make those kinds of sounds when they get hit? Almost sounds like there are bones breaking... Are we really gonna do this? Am I gonna be alive to see the sun rise tomorrow? Aren’t I just gonna die the moment something like that hits me?”

“Don’t be such a worrywart, Laddie. But, yeah, Kaede... What, are you expecting us to train until we can pull off crazy stuff like *that*? Pretty sure that’s impossible.”

“The path to power is a path of conquering your own weaknesses. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, as they say.”

“*Mmm...* You sure Pops is even human?”

“Are we gonna be able to go back alive? This kinda seems really dangerous...”

The orphans hadn’t expected Zelos’s training regime with the cocos to be *this* crazy. After all, they couldn’t even see the flurry of punches both combatants were making. It was just a blur.

What was their common sense even worth anymore? What had happened to reality? All they could see was absurdity after absurdity, barreling toward them like a freight train. It had left them shaken, to say the least.

Zelos and Ukei distanced themselves from each other. Then each put a hand—or wing—over their chest and bowed.

When they were done, Zelos made his way over to the orphans who’d been spectating, and raised his hand in greeting. “Hey there,” he said, a cheery tone

to his voice. “What brings you here this morning?”

“Is this really what you get up to with your mornings, Pops? There were *shock waves* just now!”

“Ah... Well, Ukei and the others have been improving lately, you see. Things have started to get interesting, so I really got into it today. Ah, the follies of youth...”

Four of the orphans responded to that in sync: “What do you mean, ‘youth’?! You’re *middle-aged*, Pops...”

One way or another, though, it was clear that Zelos and the coccos had had an intense morning.

It was early in the day, and they were really kicking up a storm of violence. You had to wonder: were they still getting their fieldwork done?

“By the way, do you kids need me for anything? I was just about to get some breakfast ready.”

“Well, uh...”

“Yeah. It’s, um...”

“We, uh...y’know?”

“Gimme meat.”

“*Really?!?*”

The three others were exasperated to see Kai prioritizing meat over the favor they wanted to ask.

He’d probably gotten cold feet from seeing the ferocious back-and-forth just now. After all, any one of those hits from either side would’ve been enough to take down a monster with ease, and he was only a child. It made sense he’d gotten scared.

“It seems they would like you to provide them with some training, Sir Zelos. It may be difficult for one as skilled as you to be their sparring partner, but perhaps the weakest of the coccos could provide them with some effective training.”

“Hmm? Where’s this coming from, all of a sudden? I don’t have any problem with it, mind you, but have you gotten permission from Luceris?”

“Well... We will all be leaving the church someday, sooner or later. And do you not think we would have an easier time becoming qualified as mercenaries if we train now, while we can?”

“*Ahhh*, I see. I suppose I could teach you all some of the basics bit by bit, at least. Want to give it a try?”

The other four responded: “Yessir!”

With Kaede having successfully negotiated on their behalf, they were now officially going to be getting training from Zelos.

Actually *doing* that training, though, was less flashy than they’d expected. In fact...

“Right—you want to just slowly extend your arm forward. While you’ve got your one foot off the ground, step down with it at the same time as you move your arm... Laddie, your arm’s dropped.”

“*Ngh...*”

“This is pretty tough.”

“I-I’m gonna *faaalll!*”

“I can’t keep my bala—”

Their training was kind of like tai chi.

It was designed to help them learn moves for fighting, covering five important bases—defense, striking, footwork, kicking, and throwing. At first glance, it might have just looked like some casual exercise, but it was effective training nonetheless—and pretty *intense* training at that, all tailored to giving them flexible muscles and more.

It was pretty tough for their first training session.

“Oh? That discipline you’re teaching them in...is it the Balance of the Crumbling Mountain? My mother used to do that rather often. I recall it being perfect for learning new moves and stances. Quite the difficult discipline too.

Very good.”

“It’d be dangerous to start right from teaching them how to fistfight, so I figured I should hammer the basics into them first. And if they can learn some breath control from this, they should eventually be able to use breathing forms too.”

This training resembled famous martial arts found in an island nation to the East.

There were five schools of martial arts there, each with their own techniques—swordplay, striking, grappling, archery, and cultivation. And it was said that any martial artist who mastered all five would reach the pinnacle of military might. Kaede’s way of the sword drew on these schools too.

Nowadays, all sorts of different branches had split off from these five base schools, and they were all ruthlessly competing with each other.

Kaede, for her part, already knew the basics, so there was no need for her to take part in this beginners’ training. Instead, she was working hard at practice of her own.

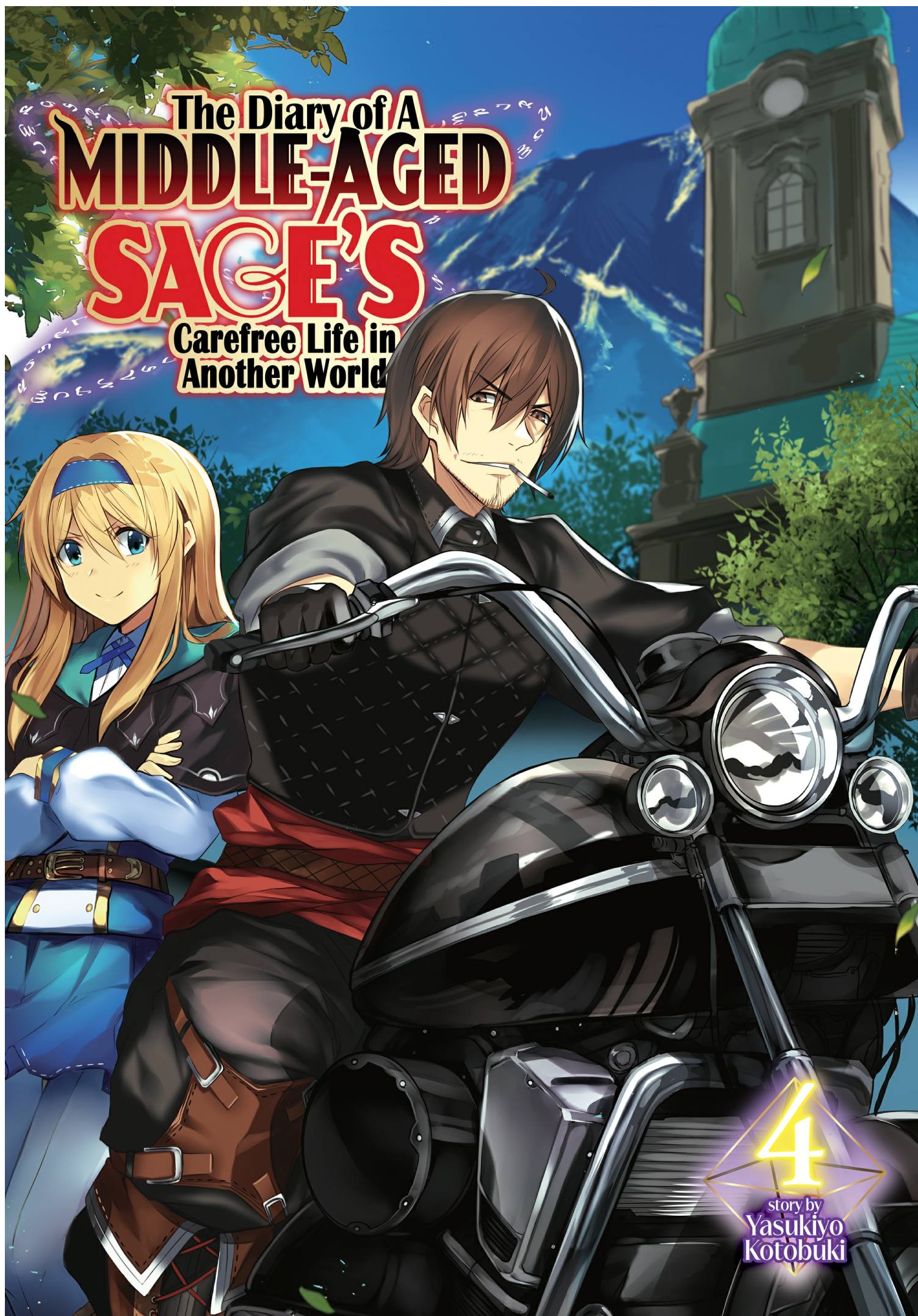
“I-Is this... Is this really gonna make us stronger?”

“You need to get the basics down pat before you start on proper training. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

“I knew it. There really *are* no gods...”

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

And the orphans were just taking their first, sure step on the journey to make their dreams a reality. It would be a while longer until their efforts bore fruit...



4

story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki



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

4
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki



“Whoa...
This is
faster
than I
thought!”

“This
should
get us
there
before
long.”

“Ooh!
This
feels so
nice!”

⌘ Jeanne

⌘ Lena

⌘ Iris

Once they were off the boat, Iris and the others hopped in a trailer hitched to Zelos's bike and hurtled along the road. However...



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The Diary of a Middle-Aged Sage's Carefree Life in Another World: Volume 4
by Kotobuki Yasukiyo

Translated by James McBride Edited by Lyn Hall

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Illustrations by JohnDee ARAFO KENJA NO ISEKAI SEIKATSU NIKKI Vol. 3

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2024