

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

Carefree Life in
Another World

3
story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki



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“I’m getting old, you see;
I’d really prefer it if
people didn’t surprise
me like that. What
happened to
respecting your elders?”

《《
The
black-clad
mage

“That’s
rich,
coming
from a
monster
like you!”

The echoing sound of metal
against metal rang out as the two
men locked swords. It was the
classic image: two fighters

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Prologue: En Route to the Istol Academy of Magic

A merchant ship was riding the Aurus River toward a city downstream.

In addition to the merchants on board for trade, the ship was carrying quite a few passengers, most of them students wearing the uniform of the Istol Academy of Magic—so it was bustling with young people. There was a wide spectrum of emotion on display; some lamented the end of their long break, while others looked forward to the opportunity to spend time with their friends again at the academy.

Similarly, there was a real disparity in what each student had gotten out of their two months back at home. You had those who'd made the most of their time and grown as individuals, but also those who'd simply lazed about, wasting their time achieving nothing in particular.

Whatever the case, they'd see the results of that time once they got to their classes at the academy. Some were equal parts excited and anxious for that moment, while others were now deeply regretting how they'd spent their time.

All in all, there was a whole range of emotions on the ship. And that was just as true for a certain two siblings.

Those siblings were Zweit von Solistia and his younger sister, Celestina von Solistia.

Both had been born to the Solistia family, one of four great ducal families that protected the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. They were the grandchildren of the Mage of Purgatory, one of the most famous mages around.

There was also a third sibling: Croesus von Solistia, the middle brother. But *he* had remained at the academy for the past two months, never once going home. By the sounds of it, he was so absorbed in his research that he hadn't even *considered* the idea of going back. He seemed to have the true character of a mage, for better or worse.

Whatever his reasons, the fact that he hadn't gone home over the break had

left his mother sulky. And that, in turn, had troubled her husband—Duke Delthasis von Solistia.

There wasn't much Zweit and Celestina could do about it; each of the three siblings had been born to a different mother. But as they thought about the struggles of Duke Delthasis, hounded by his two wives, they couldn't help but feel for him a little.

Despite that, Delthasis, who was very good at caring for the hearts of his wives, had managed to keep up happy marriages—which made him all the more impressive. He was a ladies' man with many lovers, and it wasn't for nothing.

He was also making some commendable efforts, in his own way, to make sure that his wives didn't take their frustrations out on the children.

But Zweit and Celestina were entirely unaware of that as they waited for the boat to reach the harbor.

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The sarcteulless bloomed with white flowers at the start of fall.

The petals of those flowers were then carried by the wind, dancing through the air to land on the surface of the Aurus River, where they were swept along.

It was an example of nature's ephemeral beauty—a fantastical sight that you could only see in this one season.

“So pretty...”

The purehearted Celestina said what she was thinking.

Her smile was filled with girlish innocence, and it coupled with the mesmerizing scenery to make her look almost like a fairy. Her innocent, maidenly behavior, as if untainted by any of the evils of the world, kindled adoration in the hearts of many on the ship. The boys her age blushed beet red and turned their heads away, trying to hide their faces.

Next to the girl, however, was her older brother Zweit, whose face was looking decidedly more *green* than red as he leaned over the side of the ship.

He was properly seasick.

“Blegh... How much farther to the harbor? I’m gonna die... I’m dying...”

When he kept his mouth shut, Zweit was a rather handsome young man. But right now, he didn’t have even a sliver of his usual dignified appearance. The beautiful scenery was utterly wasted on him.



“Brother? Are you still not over your seasickness?”

“Ugh... I-I’ve got nothing left to throw up... I-I might... I might be done for...”

It was just plain old seasickness, but it still wasn’t pleasant. And he wasn’t the only one suffering from it: a fair number of others were similarly afflicted, somewhat spoiling the beautiful scenery as they moaned and lurched about. Those who had boarded the ship specifically to see the view were glaring coldly at them.

At the end of the day, though, it came down to each individual’s constitution and experience. You couldn’t exactly *blame* the victims for what they were going through.

“What the hell is Miska doing? I thought she just went to get medicine? *Oblgh...*”

Miska, the head maid of Creston’s mansion, was on the ship with them; she’d come to protect Celestina and take care of her day-to-day needs. But she’d gone down into the cabin of the ship to get some medicine a while ago now, and she hadn’t come back.

“You’re right... It’s been almost an hour. I wonder what she’s doing?”

“D-Don’t tell me... She’s just being *cruel*, isn’t she? She’s standing somewhere, watching me suffer, and *enjoying* it!”

“I don’t think even Miska would do something so mean. Probably...”

Celestina wasn’t confident enough to rebut her brother with any sincerity. After all, Miska had an unusual personality in more ways than one. Celestina wasn’t a good enough judge of character to guarantee that her maid *wouldn’t* do something like that to Zweit. In fact, it seemed entirely possible for her to be immature enough that she’d *go out of her way* to make him miserable, all without dropping her usual nonchalant expression.

“May I ask why you sounded so uncertain of yourself just then, milady?”

“Hyah?! M-Miska? When did you...”

“Just now. Why do you ask?”

A woman in a maid's uniform had appeared behind Celestina. She had short black hair tinged with purple, slightly slanted eyes, and triangular glasses, giving her the overall impression of a cool and collected beauty. But she had a rather disdainful personality.

Even Celestina and Zweit's grandfather, Creston—the Mage of Purgatory himself—could never tell what was going on in the maid's mind. She was a woman of great character and nerves of steel. And she had the uncanny ability to vanish and sneak up on people, surprising them before they even had a clue she was there.

“M-Miska! What have you been *doing* all this time?! Did you bring me...my medicine?”

“I do apologize. I happened to acquire some unusual sweets from a peddler along the way, and I needed some time to enjoy their taste. They were truly delicious too. I ended up buying quite a few more than I had expected to.”

“So you *were* just being mean! Do you really enjoy watching me suffer that mu— *Blegh!*”

“You *do* say some unusual things, Sir Zweit. To begin with, travel sickness medicine is usually meant to be taken *before* boarding a ship, is it not? By the time you are actually seasick, it is much too late. Even if you *were* to take the medicine now, we would likely have already reached harbor by the time it took effect. In the future, I would recommend that you read up on your medicine's instructions.”

She had a fair point. But at the same time, she *had* left him here to suffer for almost an hour while he waited for her.

“I-I can't... I feel like I'm about to faint...”

“How shameful, allowing a mere boat to reduce you to this state. I dread to think what the future holds for the great ducal house of Solistia if *this* is to be its next head. Perhaps you need to be whipped back into shape.”

“Um... Miska? Why are you talking down to him? Now that I think of it, you *are* our servant, aren't you? Should a servant be talking like this?”

“Milady, I say such things because I *am* superior. To everybody. The only one

on my level is perhaps Duke Delthasis. As infuriating as that may be to admit... I *do* intend to settle that matter with him one day.”

The maid’s unbelievably presumptuous attitude left Celestina’s mouth agape, and she found herself unable to close it. She didn’t know how much of what Miska was saying was serious, but regardless, she was lost for words.

Come to think of it, the mothers of Celestina’s two older brothers—in other words, the two duchesses—were very much afraid of the woman. So afraid that if the two of them ever encountered her, they would run away without delay.

“I’ve been wondering this for a while, Miska, but just what kind of person *are* you? Why are both of the duchesses so afraid of you? The only possibility I can think of is that you have some sort of connection to Father, but...”

“Milady, my ninety-nine secrets are matched only by my ninety-nine-centimeter bust. And I am not the type to so readily reveal those secrets.”

“Ninety-nine centimeters? You know, Miska, you shouldn’t lie abou— Wait. I’m sorry. Please stop looking like you’re about to hit me...”

The bizarre conversation wore on. Meanwhile, the boat continued to quietly float down the river, carrying the two siblings, who were going through hell in more ways than one...

Chapter 1: Life without the Old Guy

The Istol Academy of Magic existed to train youngsters from relatively well-off families as mages. Older than the Magic Kingdom of Solistia itself, it was a prestigious school with more than three hundred years of history to its name, and it had earned quite a reputation even overseas, becoming the most famous educational institution. Its vast grounds contained a great many magical research institutes and even a town to help support the lifestyles of its students; it would have been no exaggeration to say it was a proper college town.

Many who aimed to become mages yearned to study at the academy, but its doors were closed to all but a select few. It was a highly competitive school, and your chances to get in hinged on your academic record.

Nowadays, the academy was a mess of different factions; power struggles were constantly erupting out all over the place. If it had been limited to mere clashes of opinions between the students, it would be one thing. But in reality, it was more like a proxy war for the various magical noble families.

The nobles—themselves alumni of the academy—manipulated their children so as to mold the factions to their will. What was more, the nobles scorned and ostracized those who didn't meet their demands, and they had nothing in their heads but the desire to expand their own influence.

The majority of those nobles were mages who'd received either inherited magic, which was taught to them by previous generations, or special magic that had somehow been *genetically* passed down to them, generally referred to as bloodline magic. Regardless, the general public thought they were a right nuisance.

While the academy was a place for social interaction, it was also something like a war front where ambitious nobles clashed in their desire for ever more power. And as much as it would've been nice for the nobles to keep all of their little plots and conspiracies behind closed doors, their quarrels had the

unfortunate tendency to spill over into the general student body as well. Belonging to a faction only made it all the easier to get caught up in those quarrels.

And Celestina now found herself in a position where she would have a hard time staying out of it all.

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Celestina let out a sigh. “This is such a pain. Am I really going to be able to learn anything here?”

She’d only just begun unloading her luggage from the carriage, and she was already complaining, reluctant to accept reality.

She’d just come from being taught by a Great Sage, after all. She could hardly imagine that she’d be able to learn anything new at the academy now.

Over the past two months, she’d learned to actually use magic, and even decipher and improve magic formulas—albeit just the basics. So in her mind, whatever the academy had to offer would inevitably fall short.

“Remember, milady, they say that sighing too much can make you look like an ape. Please keep that in mind.”

“I thought the saying was that it lets the happiness escape?” Whatever the case, she sighed again. “Every day has felt so rewarding lately; I just can’t work up the motivation to go back to *this*. What does Master expect me to even learn here?”

“Perhaps he is expecting you to do things that you can *only* do as a student here? Making friends, stealing a horse and riding off into the distance... You know, truly making the most of your youth. Is that not itself a privilege granted to students?”

Calm and matter-of-fact as usual, Miska must’ve been aware that Celestina didn’t *have* any friends. Well, there was perhaps one individual she could call a friend...but they were a bit of an *odd* individual.

“Now that I’m back here, I suppose complaining isn’t going to help. I know I’m not going to get anything out of my time here, but I’ll have to just accept it...”

Another sigh.

“So you’re finally giving in? More importantly, please carry some of the luggage. I would appreciate whatever tiny bit of help I can get.”

“Miska... Are you saying I’m just a ‘tiny’ bit of help? I can at least carry my own luggage by myself.”

Though she was a little annoyed by her maid’s words, Celestina picked up a largish bag, somehow carried it up the stairs with great difficulty, and eventually arrived at the dormitory.

The academy’s student dormitory was built with something like Roman concrete, and looked almost Gothic in style. As soon as you went through the front entrance, your eyes would be drawn to the rib vault ceiling, which was made up of a framework of crisscrossing arched ribs. To both the left and right were hallways that led to the rooms for the students to live in, while directly in front was a symmetrical double staircase. The architecture wasn’t exactly showy; if you wanted to criticize it, you could say it was plain. But it had a similar vibe to the Solistia family’s second residence, where Celestina lived, so she found it calming.

To the left and right of the building were small spires. They were mainly intended as disciplinary chambers, but they hadn’t seen much use.

This was an old building, so it was where students from merchant or ordinary civilian backgrounds came to live.

“Hey, over there—it’s the failure!”

“Huh? She can’t even use magic. Why’d she bother coming back?”

“Does she still not understand just how worthless she is? Bet she only managed to enroll in the first place due to her family’s connections...”

“She’s part of the ducal family, but her mother was just a mistress, right? Does she not even understand the concept of shame?”

“Yes, she truly is shameless, isn’t she? It would be so much better if she were to simply disappear.”

Those who saw Celestina returning looked at her with expressions of blatant

scorn and ridicule. To them, Celestina had brains but no talent; as the daughter of a ducal family, she seemed like a failure who was only there because of her family's influence, a girl who'd coasted by on favoritism. To these students, who had gotten here by paying massive tuition fees and working themselves to the bone in their studies, the very sight of her was doubtlessly infuriating.

Celestina herself understood that—and so previously, she'd holed herself up inside the academy's library. While she'd felt bad for those other students, she'd also been desperate to do whatever she could to become capable of using magic.

Of course, all her desperate study had led to disappointing results. But that was in the past now.

Now, she was capable of using magic, and she could even cast some simple spells without the need for an incantation.

But the other students at the academy didn't know how much she'd changed. Celestina had fought in a horrendous forest where her life had been on the line every day—and she'd survived. At this point, she was already far stronger than the rest of the students at the academy.

"Please do not let their words get to you too much, milady. They are unaware of the person you are now."

"I know. I'm just surprised I was able to stay in a place like this only two months ago. Honestly, it's nothing but unpleasant."

"Perhaps having all that weight removed from your heart has opened up your eyes to notice your surroundings that you weren't aware of before. And I imagine it will only get harsher from here."

"I know, Miska. But I'll show them all—I'll graduate this academy as a mage who won't put Master to shame!"

Celestina walked forward, undaunted, her expression filled with determination.

Around her left wrist, the bracelet that her tutor, Zelos, had made for her as a magic conduit gave off a metallic gleam. She was about to raise the curtains on her new life at the academy.

Two days had passed. Celestina had steeled herself, and she was attending her lectures with the determination to make it through whatever hardships awaited her. But her situation wasn't about to change that easily.

Socially, it was just like it had been two months ago—she was constantly haunted by looks of scorn and contempt.

Honestly, she was stricken with an urge to just run away from it all. But somehow she was managing to hold herself back and keep attending class.

It was a similar story with the academy's teachers, who continued to pretend that they couldn't even see her; they avoided speaking to her unless they absolutely had to. After all, if she blurted out complex questions about the course material, they wouldn't have a clue how to respond.

Celestina was very much the Achilles' heel of the teachers. While they appreciated her desire to learn new things, she came at them with difficult questions that they didn't even know the answers to themselves, making her a real thorn in their sides.

Despite her lack of magic, she'd always had a brilliant mind. That combination made her a nuisance for the teachers to deal with—and so ultimately, they'd ended up just ignoring her.

Considering that their job was to *teach*, it was a rather questionable attitude. But to them, her brilliance made her truly annoying to deal with. And if they openly recognized that brilliance, it would become all the clearer how insignificant they were in comparison.

If she'd been able to use magic, it would've been a different story. But because she *couldn't*, and did nothing but delve into theory, the teachers had ultimately found themselves unsympathetic to her concerns.

Celestina herself was doing her best to ignore how the teachers saw her as she took down notes from the class on paper.

This world didn't have anything as convenient as notebooks. You just bought individual sheets of paper—and if you couldn't, you'd just have to memorize everything. And so, the students of the academy took their classes seriously.

I remember looking into this topic at the library before. Master told me that preparing for my lessons was important, after all. But aren't they wrong from the start, as soon as they say that each magic letter is meaningful by itself? The right way to make magic formulas is by stringing the magic characters together to create instructions for converting mana into whatever result you're after; is it really okay for them to be passing on this sort of misinformation about how magic characters work?

Celestina didn't see anything that she should be learning at the academy as it was now. Since she knew the truth about magic characters and magic formulas, it was arguably pointless for her to be taking these classes.

But she also felt that it was wrong for the academy to be teaching misinformation to students. For the sake of all the future students to come, she thought that she had to put a stop to how things were being taught.

And so she put her foot in her mouth.

"Instructor Samas, may I ask a question?"

A voice inside the instructor's head screamed: *Here it comes!*

It was the start of a scenario that he very much wanted to avoid.

"What is it, Celestina? Has something about the lecture struck you as odd?"

"Well, it's just... I've been thinking about this for a while, but when we talk about magic characters, we're talking about fifty-six phonetic characters, plus ten other characters for numerals, yes? And the current consensus of magic theory is that each of those characters carries its own meaning and gets combined in complex ways to make magic formulas? Is all of that right?"

"D-Does anything about that seem wrong to you?"

"This might sound like a naive question, but...instead of that, might it not be the case that these magic characters work the same way as letters in language? Letters that should be put together into *words*, at which point they actually mean something? If that *is* the case, then rather than each and every letter mean something by itself, the instructions that formulas use to transform mana are created by stringing those letters together to make words, so would there really be any point in what we're learning right now?"

The question came as a shock to Instructor Samas.

Modern efforts to decipher magic formulas weren't going well. Or perhaps that was an understatement; it might have been more accurate to say that they'd stagnated entirely.

Most mages saw magic formulas as being essentially a string of magic characters—a puzzle, almost, that required you to chain together the right magic characters in just the right way in order to exert control over magic.

But if the things being chained together were not letters but *words*, the implications would be entirely different.

"Please hold on a second, Celestina. Do you... Do you understand the gravity of what you're saying?"

"Yes. I think I understand it fairly well."

"Your suggestion could completely overturn all the research we've done so far. You know that, right? Right from the foundations. You'd be making droves of magic researchers into your enemies. That's how dangerous your idea is."

To recap, the current state of research into deciphering magic characters was something like this: each individual magic letter held meaning, and by figuring out the best way to line those letters up together—like solving some sort of puzzle—you could make mana turn into physical phenomena. Magic formulas, then, were seen as almost akin to circuit boards; they were a technology that you could pass mana through to convert that mana into phenomena.

What *Celestina* had come out and said, however, was completely different. Her suggestion was that magic characters were, quite literally, *letters* used to make words, and that physical phenomena were caused by creating words that evoked the transformation of mana.

Both theories shared the basic idea of mana somehow turning into physical phenomena, but the concepts lying at the foundation of each were completely different. If what Celestina was saying were true, it would mean that all of the research that society had conducted up until this point would be rendered meaningless.

Yet again, the failure's gone and said something rather troublesome...

While the teachers never said it out loud, they too looked on Celestina with scorn.

But of course, the girl in question was the daughter of a duke. So they could never slight her like that publicly.

And Instructor Samas was no exception.

“Wh-What made you think of something like that? I must say, it *is* an interesting idea, but—”

“As you know, I was never able to use magic. Which is why I’ve tried to learn all sorts of different things to find out the cause behind my problem. And when I considered the possibility that modern magic is inferior to magic from ancient times, then...well, following that train of thought led me to this conclusion.”

“I see, I see... It doesn’t sound impossible. But at the same time, it’s hardly something you can *prove*, now, is it?”

“Everyone in this world has mana, and yet there are fewer mages now than there were in ancient times. Why *is* that? Is it maybe that, as people researched things over the years and tried to modify the ancient spells, they got things wrong and ended up making those spells activate inconsistently depending on who was using them? If that *is* what happened, it’d mean that the entirety of modern magic research has been heading in the wrong direction.”

Her idea was that researchers had ended up destroying the perfected magics from ancient times. It certainly didn’t sound impossible.

If anything, there was quite a *large* possibility of that being the case. As Celestina said, the modern world only had so many mages. According to literature, magic had been used by a considerable proportion of the common people in ancient times, and it had even been incorporated into many parts of day-to-day life. But as Instructor Samas tried to process all this, something the girl had just said suddenly stood out to him.

“Celestina... Did you say earlier that you *were* never able to use magic? Why the past tense?”

“I can use it now. I’ve been practicing over the last two months, so I’ve learned to use it.”

“Wha—?! I-Impossible. I cannot believe that simply practicing for such a short period of time would allow you to... If what you’re saying is true, then what method did you use? Nobody has managed to teach you magic up until now...”

“I took part in combat training every day and did drills for my mana control in between. I kept using my mana, day after day—and then, toward the end of our break, I was able to take part in some real battles too.”

That was the *second* shocking statement she’d made. If Celestina had experienced real combat, then her level would have gone up too, as a matter of course.

When your level went up, your body optimized itself so that it could manage its newfound strength more effectively, helping to dramatically improve both your physical capabilities and your mana capacity. If Celestina’s words were to be believed, it would mean that she had *fought* her way up to a level at which she was capable of using magic. It was hardly the sort of thing that a student could accomplish over their summer holidays.

“I-It sounds like you’ve been rather reckless. Rapidly leveling up can cause abnormalities in your body. It’s dangerous.”

“It was in life-and-death situations. I didn’t have the luxury of worrying about that sort of thing. Our food was stolen by monster attacks, and we had to survive for four days by just hunting, with monsters attacking us every few hours.”

“How did you even *get* into that sort of situation? A-And there’s no way you could have survived something like that!”

“I *did* survive, though. That’s why I’m here now. One of my brothers was with me, as was a squad of knights. So you can confirm what I’m saying with them, if you’d like?”

Celestina was casting her mind back to her days spent surviving in the Far-Flung Green Depths.

She and the others had been forced to stay on constant high alert—to go into a forest teeming with monsters just to hunt for prey to satisfy their empty stomachs... And they’d survived, ultimately, though the circumstances had

somewhat warped their personalities.

A period of just a few days had transformed the proper, courteous knights into wild-hearted warriors. Zelos—Celestina's tutor, whom she held in such high esteem—had mercilessly eliminated monsters, and her older brother had danced like a madman upon discovering the joys of alchemy. Celestina herself had gotten to enjoy leveling up so much that she had ended up eagerly awaiting the arrival of each wave of monsters.

"Fighting, it...it changes people. Breaks down their hearts."

"Wh-Why have you got such a hollow look in your eyes?"

"That forest isn't the sort of place where modern mages would be able to survive. It's hell. A harsh, unforgiving place..."

"Wait. Don't tell me... Did you train in the *Far-Flung Green Depths*?!"

"Apparently the monsters deeper in are even more ferocious. Even stronger. If I went there now, I'd probably die."

What Celestina was saying was beyond imagination. The other students listening were too stunned to speak.

The Far-Flung Green Depths were a vast den of evil, filled with monsters that only grew stronger the deeper in you went. And even those on the very outskirts of the forest were incomparably stronger than the sorts of monsters that were to be found around these parts. The notion of fighting nonstop in a place like that did indeed sound like hell.

What was more, it was only the Order of Knights that would usually take part in that sort of hellish combat training; the idea of accompanying them as they headed into combat was out of the question to the various mage factions. The main factions were *already* infamous for getting along poorly with the Order of Knights, and just tagging along with a political enemy like that seemed absolutely absurd to them. About the only mages who'd be able to pull something like that off would be those from the relatively new Solistia faction.

A cold sweat ran down Samas's back. He belonged to the Wiesler faction, and if the Solistia faction was offering that kind of real-life combat training to other mages, then the balance of power in magic society stood to change quite a bit.

It would mean that the Wiesler faction—which was considered to be the combat-focused faction—would lose the key thing that set it apart, and also that the Solistia faction would end up further solidifying its ties with the Order of Knights. That, in turn, would prevent the Wiesler faction’s deepest ambition: seizing military power.

“Does the Solistia faction have many mages who are experienced in combat?”

“I can’t say, but at the very least I can say that *I’m* not intending to join any other faction. It isn’t like the mages from the *other* factions managed to help me out with my situation, after all.”

“D-Did you receive tutoring from somebody?! Just what mage from what faction would have been able to...”

“From an associate of my grandfather, so I can’t say more than that. It’s not as if I have the authority to spread that information around.”

Samas didn’t know of any faction having a mage who could teach Celestina to use magic. But if she actually *had* learned to use it, then it would have to mean that there was *someone* out there who’d tutored her.

If that mage was an associate of the famed Mage of Purgatory it seemed likely that they’d have abilities on par with his. But whoever was responsible for it, Celestina’s change came as a bombshell to those who heard it. Specifically, those who had looked down on the girl as a “failure.”

“Seriously? If the *failure’s* learned to use magic, then...what’s gonna happen to *us*?”

“Hey, guys, we’ve been... We’ve been making fun of her this whole time, haven’t we?”

“She’s the duke’s daughter, right? Isn’t this kinda bad for us?”

“What do I do? I’ve laughed at her and called her a failure while she was standing right there before...”

Everyone who’d ridiculed Celestina in the past turned pale all at once.

While it wasn’t as if they’d made fun of her directly to her face, it was undeniable that they’d spat out insults near her, intentionally speaking loudly

enough that she could hear them. Usually, it would be unforgivable behavior; but this academy, at least outwardly, had a policy of ignoring political authority. Its doors were open for all to apply, and it proclaimed itself a place where all sorts of people could have the opportunity to learn—though in reality, it was a mess in which powerful individuals and factions ran rampant.

Against that backdrop, it hadn't taken long for Celestina, a duke's daughter who seemingly had no talent for magic, to be turned into what was essentially a human sacrifice. Everyone had used her as a verbal punching bag for venting all of the frustration they'd built up.

"I-I bet she's just bluffing anyway. No way she would've struggled like that in the first place if she were capable of getting better in just two months."

"Right? It shouldn't be anything to worry about."

"Yeah. It sounds fake..."

Some of them were refusing to believe their ears. Their grades were on the lower end, and they were among the masses who'd made fun of Celestina, the girl who was incapable of using magic. Celestina could vaguely recall their faces, but at this point, she simply didn't care about their existences one way or the other.

Just as the lecture hall was growing louder and louder, the bell rang to signal the end of class.

"That's it for today's lecture. Celestina, your theory is truly interesting. I might take a look into it myself."

"Oh? Tell me if you figure anything out, please. I'll be looking forward to it, Instructor Samas."

It was then that Samas wondered whether Celestina might already know the results of that research herself. It was already hard to believe that she'd learned magic in such a short time—and if this unknown associate of the Mage of Purgatory had been able to make *that* possible for her, perhaps they'd also taught her knowledge that even Samas didn't have.

As a magic teacher, Samas was reluctant to let go of his pride and confidence. But at the same time, he was gripped by a sense of unease like nothing he'd

ever felt before. Unease that everything he'd learned and taught about magic, everything he'd assumed to be common sense, was about to come crumbling down.

Ultimately, Samas was unable to prove Celestina's hypothesis.

The whole concept of putting together magic characters to make words meant throwing away all the results of modern research. When he thought of the work that would be required to decipher those words, it became apparent to him that they'd need to start groping around blindly from square one, like researchers had done way back when the academy had first been established. In other words, everything he had taught as common sense up until now would have to be torn up and thrown away.

As someone who had himself graduated with just *fairly* good grades, he was unable to accept that new possibility and ultimately refused to acknowledge it.

It would only be a while later that he would learn what his decision led to.

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It wasn't as if the Istol Academy of Magic taught nothing *but* magic. It had a wide range of courses, from national history to literature, mathematics, and medicine.

The students were free to take these classes as they wished; they weren't forced to attend lessons that didn't interest them. The classes worked somewhat like university lectures, then, but the flaw was that if you missed one lecture and rejoined the course later, you wouldn't be able to understand what was happening.

The classes that Celestina took were mostly magic and physics. And starting this new semester, she was taking part in transmutation classes as well. Day after day, she would take notes in class, then prepare in the library for her next lessons. Nobody called out to her while she was there, though some watched from a distance, curious, while others glared at her with hostility.

The former group was interested in finding out what sort of magic Celestina the failure could use; the latter group was worried that she might now formally accuse them for all the times they'd mocked her in the past.

There was also a third group: those who were looking at her almost as if she were a traitor. These students were the ones on the verge of becoming dropouts, the ones who were on the bottom rung when it came to academic abilities.

Celestina hadn't done anything *bad* to this group; she hadn't actively betrayed them in any way. But they had cast her in the role of traitor nonetheless. Quite simply, seeing her completely unable to use magic had made them feel better about their own inadequacies—and now, that was no longer the case. Before, they'd been able to think, *At least I can use magic, so I'm not as bad as she is*, and, *She's got brains but no talent, so I'm still better*, and so on, viewing her through a twisted lens as the last line of defense in maintaining their own status.

Looked down on as they were, they'd felt like they *needed* to do that to stay sane in this academy, with all of its fierce factional disputes. But at the end of the day, they had been treating her with contempt out of their own convenience; it was completely unfair of them to think she had betrayed them at all.

The days continued to pass like that, for a while...and then came a certain class. A class that some looked forward to and others dreaded, hoping it would never come. It was time for the students to practice activating magic. The students assembled on the training grounds and prepared to fire off spells.

For this class, the students would spend close to an hour just endlessly firing off spells at enemies. It was intended to teach your body how much mana you consumed by casting magic.

In real combat, you'd be left stranded on the battlefield if you ran out of mana. And even if you had just a *bit* of mana left, it wouldn't do you much good if you couldn't use it to put up a fight. Those were the reasons for the class, and they were perfectly valid reasons indeed—though in reality, it was mostly there to let the students vent their stress.

The students used a beginner spell for this: Fireball. The power of the spell could be used to measure how much mana each student had, as well as their control over that mana.

Since modern society had forgotten the ancient concept of utilizing mana from nature, the students had to power all of the magic they were using with their own internal mana. The idea was if you kept using your mana until you ran out, you'd get a sense for how much you had and get better at dealing with it. Though in reality, the students just fired off magic with abandon, preventing them from seeing any results on that front whatsoever.

If a certain Great Sage were here, he'd try to make them learn the Mana Control and Increased Mana skills. But unfortunately, that didn't even occur to the teachers here; that was just how inexperienced they were.

The teachers, after all, were themselves alumni of the academy. It was all one big cycle.

Celestina could do nothing but sigh.

"I take it you are not particularly motivated, milady?"

"I'd rather we were fighting against golems. Training like that lets you strengthen your mind and your body at the same time; I could just *feel* that I was improving, and at multiple things at once."

"So you are saying that you are not interested in this because it is too easy?"

"Well, yes. I already know about things at a far higher level than what I can experience here."

Feeling that the lady she served had a promising future, Miska, too, let out a sigh.

It seemed she had also come to the conclusion that there was nothing of worth for Celestina to study at this academy.

"The academy *does* have a huge number of documents, though, and I have to gather as much information as I can. I don't want to miss out on the chance to have Master make me the very best magic conduit he can!"

"Information about the...laws of physics, was it? That was one of the topics that Sir Zelos mentioned you would need to study, correct?"

"Yes. If you're creating spells, it's important to know how different phenomena work. While I can read the magic formula to get a general idea of

things, it's still only kind of a vague understanding, and referencing the formula against those sorts of laws would let me learn how the spell's activation actually works."

While Celestina had become somewhat capable of deciphering magic formulas, she wasn't yet good enough to make new spells herself. For now, her top priority was to deepen her knowledge—honestly, she would've preferred to skip this class, which was training in name but more like playtime in practice. In a sense, the days when she'd been incapable of using magic had let her make better use of her time.

She sighed for what was perhaps the dozenth time today.

"Oh? Why, Celestina—if it isn't you! I was unaware you were still at this academy!"

Here came one *more* thing causing problems for Celestina.

The voice that had called out to her belonged to a girl with her hair in blonde ringlets. Her name was Carosty lud Saint-Germain.

She was the daughter of Marquess Saint-Germain—of that same Saint-Germain family that headed up the eponymous faction, which itself was the leader of the country's magic research factions. And she was one of the few people who would take the chance to call out to Celestina whenever she found the opportunity.

"Carosty. It's been a while."

"That it has, Celestina. Truly, though, what a rare sight it is to see you taking part in this class!"

"A class? It looks more to me like everyone's just playing around. There's nothing to be gained here."

"I suppose so. By the way, I hear that you've learned to use magic now... Just what means did you use to achieve that, I wonder? I really am intrigued."

"Would you like me to tell you?"

"Oh, I would love nothing more. Why, it has me so curious that I cannot even sleep at night!"

Celestina wasn't really good at dealing with this girl.

Carosty herself actually didn't intend to bully Celestina, but her words and behavior made it look to any bystanders like she was doing just that. And perhaps because of that, others around her didn't make any effort to hide their own, *actual* disdain for Celestina.

Still, Carosty wasn't a bad girl at heart, so it wasn't as if Celestina could just rudely brush her off. She was a pain to deal with in more ways than one.

"I spent three hours fighting nonstop against mud golems. It lets you train both your mind and your body, but I'm not sure I'd recommend it."

"W-Well, that certainly sounds...splendid. But where, pray tell, did you manage to procure such numbers of golems?"

"A mage my grandfather knows made them using the Golem Creation spell. They're not just strong; they move in an organized way too. So I got hurt a fair few times."

"I have never *heard* of a mage of that caliber! Is he a Master rank, perhaps?"

"Higher than that. He's been traveling a lot, so it sounds like it's difficult to meet him—I just so happened to meet him by coincidence when I was going back for my summer break. He just taught me the basics over the last couple of months."

Given the situation, Celestina couldn't exactly tell Carosty all about Zelos, so she mixed in some lies on the spot to try and dodge the topic.

But even then, Carosty was amazed by the existence of what sounded like a mage of astounding talents.

"Where would that individual happen to be now? I would *most* like to meet with him!"

"Unfortunately, he set out traveling again as soon as our summer break ended. He's not the sort of person who's interested in political power, after all."

"Excellent! Most excellent! So there *are* still genuine mages in this world, it would seem!"

The Saint-Germain faction was full of magic researchers. They believed that

the reason magic research wasn't making good progress was a lack of excellent mages, and had set out to gain political power to help them headhunt mages from other countries. They published research results in a wide range of fields, from the cultivation of medicinal plants to archaeology to the development of healing potions, and engaged in things like investigations, experimentation, and excavation.

Research was the faction's *raison d'être*, and the ideals of its founder were duly reflected in Carosty, who was not only a student of the academy but also a descendant of that same founder. Therefore, she held the Sages of old in great admiration. If she learned of the existence of a *Great Sage*, she would undoubtedly use every resource available to her to scout out Zelos. So for the sake of her teacher, who wished simply to live a quiet life, Celestina mixed together fact and fiction in an attempt to dodge Carosty's questions.

There's no way I can tell her my teacher was a Great Sage. If she knew, I'm sure she'd insist on meeting him immediately—and even if I told her no, I feel like she'd skip school and barge her way into meeting him anyway.

Carosty was rather overeager when it came to that sort of thing.

"Next! Celestina von Solistia."

Hearing the teacher's voice brought Celestina back to her senses. It seemed like it was her turn.

"Well, then, I'll go."

"Do keep moderation in mind, milady."

With half-hearted footsteps, Celestina walked to where the teacher was waiting for her.

"Is Celestina truly capable of using magic now? I must say, she seemed much the same as usual when I was speaking with her..."

"Just watch. Milady is stronger than the average mage by now."

"By the way, Miska, what brings you here? I thought maids were supposed to be in the dormitories during class?"

"It is because I am an alumna of the academy."

It wasn't a proper reason. Even alumni weren't allowed to just wander about inside the academy as they pleased—yet Miska had said it without a hint of shame or hesitation, as if it was simply a matter of fact.

With the gazes of the onlookers gathering on her, Celestina faced the target and measured her distance.

The target was a piece of armor, which was made of an alloy of damascus ore and mithril and had been enchanted with a formula to give it magic resistance.

Since it wasn't the sort of armor that would break easily, it was perfect for testing whether the students could fire their magic accurately, and how powerful that magic was. It had been made sturdy enough that even leaving a scratch on it would be enough to class you as excellent.

“Okay. Here I go.”

A sigil appeared in Celestina's palm, bringing a small ball of fire to life. It *looked* like a proper fireball, but it was far smaller than those brought forth by the other students.

On seeing it, the others were unable to hold back their laughter. *What? Is that all?*

But their teacher was surprised for a different reason: Celestina had cast the spell without an incantation.

“Release.”

The fireball was released and flew toward the armored target. It shot out at incredible speed—and on impact, it generated an intense heat that melted the target and pierced right through the metal. An explosion then erupted from inside the armor, blowing it into tiny pieces.

She'd shot a fireball, the same as all the other students. But compressing her fireball into a smaller form had increased both its heat and its power—and once the fireball exploded, its destructive force was in a completely different league. All that compression had helped convert the heat to destructive force, making the overall spell that much more effective and powerful than the casts from the other students.

Even if she was using the same base spell, her use of a different formula, plus a combination of the Magic Control and Mana Control skills, had made it so much stronger.

What was more, since the spell Celestina had cast was a version improved by Zelos, it was on par with the magic of ancient times. It consumed little of her internal mana, and it was powerful to boot, so in a sense you could say it was unfair.

“Wh-What was *that*?!”

“No way... Why the hell was it so strong?!”

“That *was* the same spell, right? What the hell about her is a ‘failure’?!”

The training grounds were in an uproar. Someone had just utterly destroyed the “magic-resistant” armor; it was completely unprecedented. Furthermore, the one who had done so was the girl who was infamous as the academy’s “failure.”

From that day on, the girl who’d been called a failure would instead become well-known as the academy’s *prodigy*.

To her, though, it was a meaningless title.

What she was *really* aiming for was to catch up to her tutor. And that still seemed like such a faraway goal...

Chapter 2: A Day in the Life of Zweit

Zweit von Solistia was a student of the Great Sage, and both son and presumed successor of the Solistia ducal house. Aware of the weight that carried, he had a diligent side—ultimately, he did always make sure to stick to his studies.

He was currently in the middle of a roundtable event that students of the Wiesler faction—the mage faction he belonged to—were holding to discuss military strategy. But he couldn't help but feel like the whole debate was far divorced from reality.

“I’m *telling* you, if we deploy the Order of Knights here, and put the Order of Mages to their left and right to attack with magic, we’ll have the enemy stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

“Would it really be that easy, though? There’s no way any human opponent would fall for such an obvious strategy. You’re being naive!”

“It could be useful in the right situation, but is the Order of Knights really going to do what we ask them to? It’d be obvious we were using them as bait.”

“Yeah. Considering the danger it’d put them in, I don’t think they’d follow the plan. And even before that, there’s the issue of whether we’d be able to get into a position where we could use this formation to begin with.”

The purpose of this debate was to run simulations and decide how to best deal with a hypothetical enemy encampment. But while it was intended as an opportunity to flesh out the participants’ knowledge of strategy through discussion, all anyone was doing so far was finding faults in what the others said.

There were more than thirty students gathered here, and most of them had no experience in actual combat. Their lack of knowledge about the battlefield showed. Ultimately, none of what they were saying went beyond the realm of unworkable armchair theories.

“What do *you* think, Zweit?”

“Diio, this is meant to be a meeting to talk about strategy, right? Then shouldn’t we bring in the knights, who actually *know* something about the battlefield? The simulation we’re running here includes them as well, you know.”

That one line sent the room into silence.

The Order of Knights and the Order of Mages were like cats and dogs. The very thought that the knights might agree to join this discussion seemed absurd.

What was more, the Wiesler faction in particular was full of members who believed that the Order of Knights should simply do as the faction told them. They saw Zweit’s suggestion as a betrayal—a slight to their dignity.

“Why should we have to call the *knights*? Those good-for-nothings would be useless without our help.”

“On the battlefield, you’re not alone. There are all sorts of leaders going back and forth, discussing tiny little details; that’s the only way you can actually carry out a strategy. One person’s opinion is nothing more than that—an opinion, to be considered for reference. Battles can change completely depending on time and circumstance.”

“I know, but...I can’t imagine the knights listening to anything we say.”

“Then what’s even the point in having this whole discussion? We can spend as long as we like thinking about strategies, but I can’t imagine them actually *executing* any of those strategies for us. Plus, the simulation here’s underestimating how fast the enemy could move.”

“Really? *I* thought it seemed pretty accurate...”

Even Diio, Zweit’s friend, hadn’t noticed the gaping holes in the strategies being discussed.

But Zweit, fresh from the Far-Flung Green Depths—infamously the most dangerous place in the country—just found this whole discussion pointless.

“Let me ask you this, then. Why the hell are we assuming that we’ll be equally

matched with our enemy in every possible way? Look—both sides have the same numbers for equipment, supplies, even people. And the *last* simulation we did was one in which our side way outmatched them.”

“That’s because... Well, it’s because putting together a force strong enough to match your enemy is one of the basics of war, right?”

“Okay, look... To begin with, there’s no *way* things are always gonna be that convenient. You’ve gotta consider political issues and the time of year and differences in each country’s power; each of those is gonna affect the strength of the armies, right? If you actually stop to *think* about that, your strategies are gonna change. A lot. It’s *moronic* to just assume that you’ll always be evenly matched with the enemy and that they’ll move how you want them to.”

“Can you get to your point already? I understand your reasoning, but I can’t tell what you’re actually trying to get at.”

“What I’m saying is, nobody here’s planning for the worst-case scenario. Right from the start, everything’s built around the assumption that we’re going to win, and then we’re just thinking up enemy movements to fit that assumption. So what’s the point in even *having* this discussion?”

This was how the modern Wiesler faction operated.

At the end of the day, it was just a bunch of students who’d never actually experienced the horrors of real combat. They couldn’t even *imagine* the worst-case scenario.

In turn, that lack of imagination led them to conclude that their own victory was inevitable, and so they built their entire strategy around that conclusion.

“Well, what would *you* prefer for the enemy numbers, then? Come on, let’s hear it.”

“Let’s see... Before we even get to that, I’d say something like, the neighboring country’s in the middle of a famine. Food prices are soaring, and the people are about to starve. So the enemy puts everything they have into assaulting Solistia, and then they start pillaging. Their common people join the army, and they end up with about...let’s say, ten times our fighting strength. How about that? And of course, we can’t tell what their plans are, so it starts

with us getting hit by a surprise attack.”

This proposal shocked the other students who’d been listening to Zweit and Diio’s discussion, sending the debate space into an uproar.

The idea of an enemy force ten times stronger than their own had never even crossed these students’ minds. And here came Zweit, proposing a situation in which an enemy army made a surprise attack out of nowhere. A situation in which Solistia was being invaded by an enemy the size of an army corps that was pillaging food and other resources as it went. And in the face of this terrible scenario, the students were suddenly unable to come up with a strategy.

“That’s impossible! What *you’re* suggesting is *far* more absurd than what *we* were talking about!”

“How are you so confident about that, Samtrol? From the enemy’s perspective, pillaging a neighboring country’s the quickest way to stop your people from starving, and it gets you more territory too. At the end of the day, alliances are nothing but ink on paper; you can’t put all your trust in them. When it comes down to it, a country in that situation probably *would* just attack their neighbor, even if it meant destroying them.”

“B-But that’s...”

“So? How would all of *you* make your way out of this situation? In the time it’s taken you to complain about my idea, the invasion would’ve already started. Civilians are already dying. Their property is getting stolen. You need to make a decision, and fast.”

None of them could put forward any response to the scenario Zweit had laid out. Having only ever imagined situations they could win, they were utterly incapable of putting together a strategy for something urgent like this.

But the simulation here wasn’t unrealistic. It really *was* a decent idea of how a war could develop in the worst-case scenario.

“By the way, *I* would put half our forces at Fort Laos to defend it. Gather up the other knights and mercenaries, have them evacuate the civilians, and let the enemies come to us. While we’re evacuating, burn down all the food that was going to be stolen; starve out the enemy. That way, we’d at least be able to

save *some* of our people.”

“You’d just be giving away most of our territory to the enemy!”

“The country’d be *doomed* with your plan!”

“The enemy wouldn’t be able to get past Fort Laos that easily. At the same time, they’d be desperate for food, so they’d be spreading out to look for it—and they wouldn’t be able to get any, so we’d probably be able to strike each group they sent out and crush them one by one. We’d be able to make them retreat before our country fell.”

It wasn’t a strategy for a glorious victory; it was a strategy to avoid the downfall of the country.

If the enemy were pillaging as they went, their invasion would slow down, so there’d be time to evacuate civilians. The enemy would have to spread out their forces to secure food—so when you went to launch a counterattack, you wouldn’t need to take on the entire army all at once. Still, to carry this out swiftly, Solistia would probably need to have a good idea of its own internal affairs at all times and maintain a fighting force that could be mobilized at a moment’s notice. Furthermore, the whole strategy was predicated on having mages come to the front lines to burn any food that was about to be pillaged.

“That’s ridiculous! Why should we have to go to the front line!”

“To burn the food and starve out the enemy. That clearly calls for mages, right? What are you even saying?”

“Just make the knights bring oil with them or something!”

“Do you really think that’d be possible on such short notice? Even then, they’d barely have enough to burn about a tenth of the food.”

“Then teach the knights some mag—”

“Come on; that’d be the same as saying that there’s no need for the Order of Mages to even exist! If the Order of Knights learned magic, then what would be the point in us even being here? Not to mention, mages who refuse to go to the front lines can’t be relied on for anything.”

Everyone there was lost for words. Zweit had suggested the sort of worst-case

hypothetical war that they hadn't even been able to imagine themselves, and the solution he'd come up with would require a rapid response. If it were by direct order of the king, the mages would have no choice but to go to the front lines, whether they wanted to or not.

There was no way the careless strategies they'd been coming up with so far would have been accepted by the heads of the military. That was just how poor their thinking had been.

"War's a terrible thing, I know. But in a situation like that, do you really think you'll just get to sit at the back and fire off your little spells from safety? Depending on the situation, *we* might be the ones starving—and if that *does* happen at some point, we'd need to do whatever we could to preserve our army's stamina and secure whatever food we could find. So I'll ask again: is there seriously any point to this whole meeting? At the moment, we don't even have the basic means to put up a proper fight. Any response to that?"

Zweit was making a very good point. There was no way that students who'd never experienced war for themselves could imagine the truly horrible things it could involve. Wars were living, evolving things, slaughter fests with clear lines between winners and losers.

"Look at you, Zweit, sounding all high-and-mighty when you've never been in a war either."

"Not war, but I *have* got some combat experience, you know! Monsters stole our food, and we had to survive in the wild for four days. And that was in the Far-Flung Green Depths."

A collective shout from the others: "*What?!?*"

"That's when I realized: it's not just knowledge that's important. It's also about learning the skills to survive in tough conditions... As you are now, you'd all just die. I'm not kidding."

Zweit now had about him an air of intimidation—an aura that set him apart from the others, who hadn't experienced real combat like he had. He had gotten an idea of how *actual* worst-case scenarios could play out, which had since helped him to imagine those sorts of scenarios more easily. It had also prompted him to read up on military strategy of his own volition. And the fruits

of that experience were now making themselves clear.

“I get that you’re trying to gain the right to command the Order of Knights, but as things are now, it’s just not going to happen. All the strategies you’re putting together are crude and full of holes, and you only see the knights as disposable pawns. Do you seriously think those same knights are going to hand over their authority to mages like that? Soldiers aren’t just some consumable items you can go out and get more of. They’re finite—so we’ve gotta make sure to keep their losses to a minimum.”

“Are you trying to say we’re all incompetent?!”

“I’m saying you’re an unruly mob that doesn’t know the first thing about battle. Or would you rather I say you’re just a burden? Maybe we *should* just teach the knights magic—they’d be *far* more useful. Besides, how many of you here would even be able to protect yourselves?”

“W-We know magic! *Powerful* magic! What do you *mean*, we can’t protect ourselves?!”

“What if you used up all your mana on attack spells? Or you ran out of mana in the middle of a retreat? You could wind up in a situation where the supply lines were cut off and you couldn’t get any mana potions—and if that *did* happen, any mages who couldn’t fight in close quarters would just die. You know that, don’t you? I nearly died myself, in fact. I only lived because another mage I know saved me.”

“Hah! Saved by a *mage*? So magic *can* do anything, then!”

“I’ll let you in on something: that mage was using magic to power up his *swords*. A mage, just like us. And it was a slash from one of his swords that saved me. Before we went into the Far-Flung Green Depths, he told me this: ‘Any mage who’s no good in close-quarters combat is just going to die on the battlefield.’ And he was right. If a battle breaks down into a melee, the mages we have now are gonna be done for...”

Silence ensued.

The other mages could put together as many armchair theories as they wanted, but none of them were actually plausible in the slightest.

Strategies were important, but you also needed to have real people implement those strategies—and there was no way a defense organization plagued with constant infighting would be able to cooperate well enough to get that done. Going into battle with no proper means of communication meant you were practically *asking* to end up stranded alone, and running with poor strategies would only leave you with more and more casualties. The battlefield was a living, breathing thing, and you had to respond to that.

And so began a great debate. Zweit used the main strategy that the group had been discussing earlier as an example, pointed out in detail what was wrong with it, and ultimately destroyed all of the ideas of the other students in the room.

The things he pointed out broke down the confidence of the others, and whenever they tried to flat-out deny what he was saying, he crushed their argument with sound reasoning.

It was a heated discussion, and it ran for about three hours.

“What I think is, there should be a divide between the mages that fight on the battlefield and the mages who focus on research. If we keep doing what we’ve been doing so far, we’re not going to train up anything except half-baked mages, and those aren’t the sorts of mages that’ll be useful in a battle. To be clear, I’m not trying to say the factions shouldn’t exist. But I *do* think we need to take another good, objective look at the situation we’re in.”

“*Tch.* You go and experience combat one time, and now you think you’re better than all of us...”

“I guess it probably does seem like that to you guys. But have any of you actually fought with your lives on the line before? Those four days I went through, we got attacked by monsters over and over and over again; it was hell. Then, to survive, we had to go out and hunt. When we did, we’d run into *more* monsters—and as soon as we killed those, there’d be different monsters again. We rotated the lookouts once an hour, and if a pack of monsters appeared, the lookouts would wake everyone up, and we’d have to fight back. That happened so many times over those four days. The whole training camp lasted for a week, but we got lucky on the first couple of days—though I only realized that

afterward. It was only when we finally got back that it started to sink in how we'd actually survived. Even then, spending time in that hell got me into the habit of suddenly waking up at the slightest noise. It's only recently I've finally been able to get a proper night's sleep again."

Again, the other students were all dumbfounded. "Just what sort of crazy stuff *happened* to you there?"

"The fact that I'd already done some combat training before that camp saved me. Thanks to that, I was still able to fight after I'd run out of mana, and I was able to make the right decisions without panicking when things got tough. It's all about experience."

Zweit's mind was cast back to the hellish training he'd been put through by the Great Sage who'd tutored him. But he felt like if it hadn't been for that training—those endlessly spawning golems coming for him, however many he defeated—he probably wouldn't be alive right now.

That experience had been put to good use in the Far-Flung Green Depths, and while he'd still struggled, he felt that, more importantly, he'd grown *stronger*. By the time he'd reached the final day of the training camp, his mind had changed so much that he was eagerly waiting for the next enemies to turn up.

"Hmph! Mages with actual combat experience are valuable, I'll give you that. But our faction's researching wide-area annihilation magic now. We won't need to be afraid of the common rabble anymore."

"That, huh? You know, I'm not *certain*, but...I'm pretty sure it's gonna be useless. There's no way a single mage would be able to process such a massive magic formula—and even if they *did* somehow manage to activate it, they wouldn't have enough mana. All we'd be doing is mass-producing cripples. So forget about it."

"What the hell do *you* know?! That formula's our faction's trump card! And you're *insulting* it?!"

"Come on. Just *think* about it for a second. It's impossible for one person's mana to power something like that. And even *if* it ended up being possible to activate it, how do you think you'd actually carry such a massive formula around?"

“Th-That’s— Well, you’d— You’d etch it into your mind, and—”

“No way. A human’s only able to memorize so many spells, and the bigger those spells’ formulas are, the fewer you can memorize. Not only are mages who’ve never experienced real combat going to be at a low level, but they’re also not going to have much mana. And I can’t imagine anyone under Level 1,000, at the very least, being able to use that spell they’re working on. So who the hell do you think is actually going to use it?”

As Zweit had explained, research into wide-area annihilation magic was flawed right down to its core. The sheer size of the magic formula meant that a human simply wouldn’t have enough mana to activate it; and even if someone *did*, it’d only be because they were a mage of at least Level 1,000 or higher. Perhaps it’d be an exaggeration to call all of the research they’d done meaningless, but regardless, the very theories behind the project were failures right from the start.

After all, this magic was created through a different process from Zelos’s similar spells.

Having seen an insanely high-level mage like that up close and personal, Zweit had reached a keen realization of his own shortcomings. And now, based on that, he’d determined that it would be futile to rely on something like wide-area annihilation magic, impractical and unreliable as it was.

“You know, rather than obsessing over some annihilation spell that may or may not even work, I think it’d be a lot more constructive if you just tried to improve yourselves.”

Samtrol let out a growl. “Is this not treason against my faction?!”

“No. I’m just saying this as one of the individual mages who’s got the country’s future on their shoulders. If you’re going to call something as basic as *that* treason or a betrayal or anything along those lines...you’re a small man, Samtrol.”

“You *dare* to—”

“Also, there’s something you’ve got wrong. This isn’t *your* faction. It belongs to all of us. It’s not just something you own. Get that into your head.”

Samtrol's stern face turned red, and he tried as hard as he could to stifle his rage.



His full name was Samtrol iva Wiesler. He was the second son of Marquess Wiesler, and he longed to someday become the faction's leader.

However, he wasn't what you'd call a virtuous person, largely thanks to his war hawk temperament. He was in the habit of abusing his family's authority to do whatever he pleased—but now, the eldest son of the Solistia ducal family had come to stand in his way.

Ideally, he had hoped to leverage the authority of the ducal family to bolster the Wiesler faction's power. And yet here Zweit was, rebelling against him and appearing capable as he did so. He'd been pulling all sorts of strings behind the scenes to try and get Zweit on his side, but it seemed like somehow, that had all been rendered worthless over the summer break. No, worse: Zweit now seemed to be a powerful *rival*.

Samtrol was getting flustered at this point, worrying that Zweit could usurp the faction from him altogether.

"How do you expect weak mages to be of any use? We can leave research to the Saint-Germain faction. What we should be doing is upping our strength and forming smoother ties between our country's organizations. At this rate, if a war breaks out, we'll be crushed."

"Are you saying we'd lose? I think you might be underestimating us a bit too much!"

"It's the truth. How can you be so sure that some other country isn't building up its strength while we're spending all our time bickering between factions?"

Samtrol continued to glare at Zweit. But Zweit, for his part, took it head-on with a calm expression.

At this point, the difference between the two young men's capabilities was becoming clear.

"There's no way we can leave the defense of our country in the hands of someone who's so blinded by political power that they can't see what lies ahead of them. Come on, Samtrol—face reality. Unless that wide-area annihilation magic is somehow perfected, everything you're saying is just a dream. No, it's a *delusion*."

“Are you *trying* to throw the Wiesler faction to the dogs, you cretin?! Oh, I see—you’ve devoted yourself to the Solistia faction now, haven’t you? Hmm?!”

“Well, I can’t deny I share some of their ideals. But the plan’s for the Solistia faction to be centered around my *sister*, you know? *My* job is just to play my role as part of one of the four major noble families.”

“*Gakh...*”

The Solistia and Wiesler families were of different social standings: the former was directly descended from the royals and entrusted with defending the country. So if anything, it was Zweit who should’ve had the more influential voice here, not Samtrol.

What with Zweit’s social standing, Samtrol could only say so much against him. Moreover, Zweit was actually making good arguments, so to any bystander, Samtrol’s words looked like nothing more than a petty attempt at picking faults.

“Anyway—it’s about time. I’m going back to the dorm.”

“Hang on, Zweit! Wait for me!”

As Zweit exited the room, Diio chased after him. This whole meeting had been carried out under the banner of the Wiesler faction, but it was ultimately something like a club activity. Once it grew late enough in the day, the students had to wrap things up—however heated the discussion had become—and head back to their dorms. That was the rule.

Most of the other students took Zweit’s departure as an opportunity to start doing the same themselves.

The only ones left behind were a group of nobles, including Samtrol.

“What’s the meaning of this? Why is he back to normal?! Your magic’s stopped working, Bremait!”

“He probably took some sort of big mental shock from something. My bloodline magic takes hold of the target’s mind over time, but apparently a major shock can break them out of the effect.”

“Are you implying something happened to him when he went back to the

duke's territory? Something significant enough to jolt his mind like that...?"

Zweit's slip into becoming a good-for-nothing son had been largely due to these people manipulating things behind the scenes.

"Bloodline magic" was a term that referred to magic one inherited by being born to a certain family's bloodline. However, its effects weren't necessarily all that strong. Bremait's bloodline magic allowed him to lace his words with mana as he was talking to someone, through which he could then gradually take control over his conversation partner's mind. In other words, it was brainwashing magic.

The magic did have its drawbacks, though: it was completely ineffective against powerful mages, and the brainwashing effect would probably be broken if the target received a strong enough blow to the mind. There was also the fact that, unless you continued casting the magic across the span of many occasions, the brainwashing would eventually fade as the target's internal mana refreshed. And since the magic worked by gradually changing the target's mind over a long period of time, it could be hard to tell at first whether it was even having an effect. In other words, there were all sorts of minor flaws with it.

The young men here had brainwashed Zweit over the course of years with the intent of enticing him into their faction to make use of the ducal house's political power. But now, all that effort had gone up in smoke.

Of course, the young men were completely unaware that Zweit's brainwashing had been lifted due to a chain of events that had begun with his case of love syndrome—a case which had, ironically enough, been exacerbated by the reckless behavior the brainwashing had brought on. Add to that the existence of the Great Sage, who had appeared and destroyed Zweit's heirloom magic with his bare hands, and Zweit's mind had been well and truly shaken. Then there was the way that he had been reprimanded by his father, and by the grandfather he so respected; ultimately, the brainwashing had been completely lifted. Surely nobody here would even begin to expect that their plans had been foiled for such reasons.

They had also been doing the same thing to the other students affiliated with the faction...but now, Zweit's utter victory in the debate today had provided a

significant shock to *their* minds as well. That being the case, they had no way of knowing when the brainwashing on those students would dissipate as well.

“Well, could you just brainwash him again?”

“Impossible. I tried it a few times during the discussion, but all of my mana was repelled. The bastard’s gotten scarily strong.”

“Shit! What a pain in the ass. He should’ve just stayed quiet and let us brainwash him...”

“It’d probably be best if we don’t make any moves just yet. There’s a chance he might’ve found me out.”

“But if we don’t do anything, we risk having the others break out of the brainwashing too and start associating with *them*.”

“If all this gets out to the public, our heads will roll—literally. We need to be careful for now.”

Their little conspiracy had been going so well, but now, it was starting to be riddled with cracks. They could no longer be quite as rash.

Using magic on others within academy grounds was taboo. The extent of that taboo depended on the specific magic you used, but brainwashing was plenty to meet the requirements for capital punishment.

Samtrol clicked his tongue in irritation and left the debate room in a foul mood.

Small-time scoundrels like him really were a dime a dozen.

*

“I swear, that Bremait bastard was up to something back there...”

“Bremait? I didn’t feel anything, though...”

“Every time he spoke, he was sending mana at me. Probably some sort of mind-related magic. Who *knows* what he was even trying to do in a place like—Wait. Brainwashing?”

“No way! It’s a crime to cast magic on other people inside the academy. And even if he *was*, then why would he be...”

“I think I’ve got an inkling.”

During the discussions earlier, Samtrol, and Samtrol alone, had never been met with disagreement from the other students.

And thinking back on everything so far, that had been the case before too—every time the students met up to discuss strategy, his suggestions were the only ones that everyone had always accepted.

The more Zweit thought about it, the clearer it all became. Normally, however amazing your plan might be, there’d be at least one person who disagreed with it. But in Samtrol’s case, there had been nobody whatsoever. And it was almost as if everyone simply *accepted* whatever he said, as if it were just normal that he was always right. It was unnatural.

“There’s a chance that they might have brainwashed everyone in the faction. Including me.”

“Wait—does that include me too, then?! I can’t believe it...”

“I’m guessing it doesn’t have that strong an effect. It’s probably the type that gets cast on you over and over again, and only starts to affect you after it’s built up over time.”

“How are you able to be so specific? I can’t even tell that anything was cast on me in the first place...”

“It’s just that...well, looking back on how I’ve acted up until now, there are so many times I wasn’t behaving like myself. And all of those times, *they* were there with me. That’s more than enough to make me suspicious.”

“Yeah, that *does* sound like enough of a reason to suspect them. Not that I remember that much feeling out of place myself.”

“They’re after the duke’s authority. I bet they were trying to use me for that... *Damn*, it pisses me off!”

For now, though, it was no more than a guess. The two of them buried their irritation in their hearts and walked the path back to the dormitory.

The custom at this school was that certain students who had excellent grades could be forgiven for skipping out on studies, to an extent. Zweit was one of

those special students—which also meant that he was allowed to roam the academy grounds as he wished, and that he was ensured time to pursue his own magic research. Zweit headed back to the dormitory, intending to devote himself to the assignment his tutor had given him.

Then Diio called out to him.

“Zweit, there’s somewhere I kind of want to go along the way. Do you mind?”

“I don’t really mind, but...where?”

“Thing is, there’s a girl I’m interested in. I want to talk to her, but *that maid with her* is too scary...”

“Ahh... Looks like springtime’s come for *someone*, huh? Must be nice...”

Zweit still hadn’t gotten over his own failed love.

He followed after Diio, who had been swept up in the whims of love, and arrived at the magic training grounds for the academy’s middle school division.

“Hey—this is the *middle school* area, isn’t it? What, are you going after a younger girl?”

“Yeah... I just felt a shock the first time I saw her. Like, *whoa, she’s beautiful...*”

“Mmm. Anyway, who is it?”

“Huh? I swear, she’s usually over *there*, just watching from the sidelines...”

“What, can’t she keep up with the others?”

Zweit wasn’t all that interested. But as he looked over, he spotted his younger sister, Celestina. And right next to her, as always, was her maid, Miska.

How the hell is Miska even able to stay arou— Hey. Waaaiiit a minute! Didn’t Diio say the girl he liked had “that maid with her”?! Don’t tell me the one he’s going for is...

Zweit was starting to get a bad premonition.

“It’s her. The one with the long, blonde hai—”

“So it *is* her! She’s...” Zweit paused for a second. “She’s my *sister*, Diio.”

“Hey, Zweit... The two of us—we’re best buds, right?”

“Huh? I mean, I guess...”

Before Zweit had even finished responding, Diio had grabbed onto one of his hands with both of his own.

If any women with certain proclivities had happened to see the two of them, they would’ve been thrilled.

“Please introduce me to her!”

“Are you *really* asking for that? Do you have some kind of death wish?”

“What—are you saying you’ll kill me? Didn’t think you were the type to be so obsessed with your sister.”

“No. I wouldn’t. But my grandfather would...”

“Wait—the Mage of Purgatory?!”

Zweit’s grandfather Creston had raised Celestina all by himself, and he’d come to harbor an extraordinary amount of love for her. When it came to her, he was abnormal, bizarre; but it also meant that he doted on her like nothing else. If Diio went ahead with this, he was virtually guaranteed to end up a mangled corpse.

“It’s rare, though. To see her training, I mean...”

“Ah... Well. It’s a long story.”

Zweit put together that Celestina, having been unable to use magic, had resigned herself to simply watching in the past.

And now it was Celestina’s turn to take part.

“I never thought I’d get to see her in action! Maybe I’ll even be able to help her out in some way now...”

Zweit didn’t respond.

Inside, he was thinking, *She’s way out of your league, okay? Maybe you could’ve done something for her in the past, but now...* He didn’t say it, though.

As the two of them watched, Celestina began to cast a spell.

In her palm appeared a ball of fire—small but shining like the sun.

The other students, who couldn't tell what was going on, could be heard snickering as they watched.

And it seemed like Dio, too, was with them, judging her magic based on the size of the fireball. "It looks like she doesn't have much talent, huh? Maybe I still have a chance, then."

However...

KABOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The target, a piece of magic-resistant armor, had suddenly been blown to smithereens. It was an unbelievable sight.

The onlookers were left with their mouths agape—the only exceptions being the two who knew what had happened to the girl over her summer break.

Ugh... You overdid it, Celestina. Hold back a little more, dammit!

Everyone who was gathered at the training grounds had just witnessed the moment at which the "failure" was reborn as the "prodigy."

"Was that... Was that seriously Fireball? It was so strong, though..."

"Diio... That wasn't Fireball. It was just Fire."

"Wha—?!"

Diio was stunned by Zweit's answer.

"How is *that* just Fire?! It's like ten times stronger!"

"Well, I mean, Fireball pretty much just activates Fire and then turns it into a ball to shoot off, right? She didn't use that formula for turning it into a ball; instead, she compressed the Fire spell in the palm of her hand and fired *that* off. When you get down to it, the only real difference between Fire and Fireball is whether or not it includes a formula for putting the fire into a ball shape. So if you can just use Fire and compress it by yourself while keeping it just as powerful, you shouldn't really need to use the Fireball formula specifically."

In addition to what Zweit was saying, *not* using the Fireball spell was actually a better way of improving your skill levels, allowing you to level up your Magic

Control and Mana Control by leaps and bounds. Fireball was simple to activate, and it was decently powerful, but it would be fair to say that it incorporated a formula that limited your growth as a mage.

Celestina had replicated the effects of Fireball using Fire. And with the benefit of adding extra power to it, at that.

“I didn’t know that was even possible... She’s a prodigy. There’s nothing I can even *try* to teach her...”

Ah... She’s gone and blown up his plans. What a cruel girl you are, Celestina...

Zweit looked at his friend Diio, who’d been left dumbfounded, with a look of pity.

The shock of what the young man had just witnessed had left his shoulders shaking.

“Beautiful... She’s— She’s an *angel*...”

“Huh?”

“She might seem like just a girl, but her resolve, and her purity, and how awe-inspiring she is... She really is an angel of magic. No, a *goddess*!”

“You’re going *that* far?! And wait, did this really just make you fall *more* in love with her?!”

“Of course it did! I’ll become a man who’s worthy of her, I promise you!”

Diio’s heart had been set ablaze with passion—of more sorts than one. The flame of his motivation was burning strong and bright.

A vivid image was starting to form in Zweit’s mind—an image of the young man being murdered by Zweit’s grandfather. Burned to a crisp by his grandfather’s heirloom magic, to be precise. Zweit could almost hear Creston’s voice now: “Why, *that’s* what you call well done... Heh heh heh...”

The flames of Diio’s love were burning fiercely, but he was unaware of just how close the flames of his *life* were to being snuffed out.

It probably wouldn’t be long until the evil clutches of the Mage of Purgatory drew near...

As a side note, it was here and now that the brainwashing on Diio wore off. The sheer weight of his emotions was just that impressive.

Chapter 3: A Day in the Life of Croesus

Croesus von Solistia was the second son of the Solistia ducal house. He was a top student at the Istol Academy of Magic, and some considered him to be a genius of a mage.

A calm and collected young man interested in nothing but magic research, he was *aware* of the squabble over succession in his family but feigned ignorance of it, immersing himself in his studies instead. Ultimately, it was just something that those around him were always kicking up a fuss over; he was merely a magical researcher, and he had no interest whatsoever in succeeding his father as the family.

Croesus wanted nothing more than to spend all his time pursuing knowledge, and believed he would die happy if he managed to spend his whole life doing just that.

And right now, he was buried under a mountain of books.

“This...isn’t going well. Just what am I missing?”

Croesus was in the middle of researching magic formulas. He also, of course, did research into potions and the like, but *this* was his specialty. Pursuing knowledge like this was what he lived for, and it was also his hobby. In short, it’d be fair to call him an otaku.

An overall attractive young man, he’d inherited his mother’s silver hair. His glasses looked good on him, but they also emphasized his rather chilly demeanor. Still, he was good at taking care of those around him and had come to gain their trust, acquiring him many a fan who sent passionate gazes in his direction. He was quite the popular boy—not that he knew it.

Regardless, that was only how he was viewed by *other* people. If he were to hear about his reputation, he’d completely deny it.

Croesus understood that his older brother was the more likely successor to the family. And so today, as on any other day, he was simply indulging his

whims, diving deep into magic research.

He really didn't see the appeal of political power anyway—as inconvenient as that was for those fighting over the family's succession.

In a sense, he was similar to a certain middle-aged mage. Though Croesus was perhaps a little different, in that his magic research was *all* he cared about; looking after other people was just something he did to help optimize that work.

Ultimately, he aimed to be logical and efficient in everything he did—and the main thing he aimed to *achieve* with that logic and efficiency was his short-term enjoyment. Everything he did was for his own sake.

Croesus's cold attitude toward others extended to his own family too. As far as he saw it, his father Delthasis was a talented man but had a bad habit of philandering; his mother was overly doting and never left him alone whenever he went home; his older brother Zweit was ill-mannered and had been turning into more and more of a fool over the past few years; and *Zweit's* mother he saw as nothing but his own mother's friend. His grandfather, meanwhile, had aspects that were worthy of respect, but lost points for constantly fawning over Croesus's incompetent younger sister.

Having been born into a family of mages, Croesus didn't care at all for his younger sister, Celestina, who'd always been unable to use magic. He'd always been similar to Zweit in that regard. But Croesus had gone about that by ignoring his sister as if she were nothing but air, even when she was in the same room as he. And that was still the case now.

Of course, Croesus had no idea that the events of the last couple of months would end up forcing him to reconsider his views of his family.

After all, he'd spent that whole period holed up inside—about three weeks of which had been spent in a laboratory granted to him by the academy. Not to mention, he was hardly the type to pay any attention to gossip in the first place. He really *was* a shut-in.

And now that recluse was trying to decipher magic formulas. He'd begun to doubt the academy's understanding and interpretation of the magic characters, and so he'd started trying to interpret them in his *own* way. However...

“Rather than each and every magic letter having its own meaning, it must be putting them *together* that makes them meaningful. And if that’s right, it’d really explain why everyone’s research so far has been so fruitless...”

Croesus was coming to suspect that magic formulas represented words, or at least some kind of instructions that resembled words.

The academy taught that each and every letter carried meaning, and that neatly passing mana through a string of those letters led to physical phenomena. However, if that were the case, it seemed odd that sometimes people could use a magic formula and yet just fail to have the spell activate at all. After all, if magic formulas were tools for neatly materializing mana as phenomena, it stood to reason that they should always have *some* kind of effect, even if there were errors in how the formula had its letters lined up.

The common understanding was that some magic in the magic characters themselves determined a spell’s element. But if spells weren’t activating *at all*, it would have to mean that mana wasn’t flowing through them in the first place. And that just seemed strange.

Based on what he and the other students had been taught, Croesus had been comparing magic formulas that *hadn’t* activated with those that had activated normally and taking specific note of any sections in the formulas that seemed out of place.

With much effort, he had picked out the strings of magic characters that were common between both groups of formulas, compared them against both each other and the formulas of other elemental spells, then thoroughly investigated any sections of the formulas that were still unclear.

That had led Croesus to a conclusion: the formulas had been modified generations ago. And following from that, he deduced that the mages who had made those modifications had essentially *ruined* what had been perfectly good magic from ancient times. He also reached the idea that perhaps the formulas were using the magic characters to represent physical phenomena in the form of words.

In the case of air magic, for example, he reasoned that strings of letters common throughout air spells were the portions that transformed physical

phenomena and gave the spells their element, while the remaining magic characters—which were common across *all* spells, not just air ones—were there to help control the spells, adjust their power, and so on.

He had come up with that hypothesis, investigated it, recorded his findings, and summarized them into a thesis, all by himself. But he still wouldn't be able to get most others to accept it. Not yet. He didn't have concrete proof.

Mages belonging to the Saint-Germain faction would probably applaud his work. Those from the *other* factions, however, wouldn't just criticize it; they'd very likely take every opportunity they had to strike the results of his research completely from the record.

As things stood, with each faction set on holding the others back, he couldn't just make his thesis public and hope for the best.

Croesus began to stand, ready to take a breather. But he'd been sitting for hours, and the movement brought a pain that caused him to grimace.

“*Ngh...* Now that I think of it, I don't actually have any idea how long I've been sitting here for.”

“You were saying the same thing yesterday, you know~? Guess you were really into it, hey, Croesus?”

Croesus turned to face the voice and saw a girl with dog ears lying on a sofa nearby, covered by a blanket and rubbing at her sleepy eyes. She had shoulder-length flaxen hair and a friendly look.

“It's you, Yi Ling? How long have you been trespassing in my room this time? I didn't even realize you were there...”

“You're so *meeeeaan*! I *did* say hi to you, you know? You just didn't notice me at all...”

Yi Ling gave him an innocent smile as she scratched at her bedhead. She was in the same year as Croesus, and just like him, she was a researcher in the Saint-Germain faction. Born to human and beastfolk parents, she'd had a lot of mana since birth, and she was one of the academy's top students, with excellent grades.

Usually, beastfolk weren't particularly good at magic. But Yi Ling was a very talented exception.

"I'm not sure a young woman should be breaking into a man's room like that."

"It's fine! I trust you, Croesus."

"I'm honored."

"Um... I trust that if I *did* end up with a baby, you'd take responsibility, and—"

"That's not the kind of trust I was hoping for."

Croesus gave a sigh of exhaustion. He wasn't exactly *bad* at interacting with women, but he was, at his core, unsociable.

The two of them spent a while talking about their recent lectures. And then:

"By the way, Croesus, don't you have a younger sister called Celestina?"

Croesus didn't know why his half sister's name would be coming up all of a sudden. Honestly, he wasn't really interested.

Until, that was...

"I do, but why do you ask?"

"I think I remember hearing she couldn't use magic, right? Was that true?"

"Yes. Everyone's said since she was young that she doesn't have the talent for it. What about it?"

"Did you know she's one of the top-ranking students in the middle school division now? Apparently she's such a strong mage that it's almost like the whole 'she can't use magic' thing was a lie all along!"

On hearing those words, Croesus dropped the book he'd been holding.

"Are you... Are you sure there's not some kind of mistake? I can't imagine she'd be able to pull off something like that..."

"People were saying she went and trained in the Far-Flung Green Depths! Together with your older brother~"

"That *can't* have happened. It's impossible. My brother *hates* her, you see."

“Hmmm? Apparently they’ve been spending a lot of time together working on something in the library, though. But it sounded like it was something difficult, so no one knew what they were talking about...”

At the very least, the Zweit in Croesus’s memories wasn’t the sort of person who’d suddenly be getting along well with Celestina. After all, he remembered Zweit actively taking the initiative to bully her when they were younger.

Something wasn’t right.

“Has he had a change of heart or something...? Even then, I can’t imagine that’d be enough for them to start getting along...”

“Aaaanyway, I got kinda curious, so I went to see for myself, and apparently it was true. It looked like the two of them were studying something together, all the way from afternoon to closing time!”

“That...*does* leave me curious. Honestly, I can’t say I care about the two of them, but hearing that they’re working together on something doesn’t sit right with me. It’s unnatural.”

“Just the two of them, sneaking around together... Ooh, maybe it’s some sort of illicit relationship?”

“Why are you trying to take things in *that* direction? It’s much more likely that something happened in the family back home.”

Croesus’s levelheaded retort caused Yi Ling to respond, “Aww, Croesus, you’re *boring*.” It kind of hurt him a little.

“Oh, by the waaay...the librarian was saying they wanted you to return the books you’ve got. Sooner rather than later, they said.”

“I...suppose I *have* been holding on to them for a while now. I *guess* I’ll go and return them...”

“Why’d you look so tired saying that?”

“Well, the books I’ve borrowed are, uh...all of the ones piled up over there.”

“You’re...going to need a cart, then, huh?”

In front of the pair was a vast mound of books, piled from the floor to the

ceiling.

It looked like it could collapse at any moment.

“You *do* use this place as an inn from time to time. So you’ll help me out...*right?*”

“Ugh... There are so *many* of them, though! Just how many trips did you even make to the library to *get* them all here?!”

“Who knows? Probably at least ten trolley-loads.”

“Oh! I just remembered, I’ve got something to do, so—”

Just as Yi Ling was about to make her escape, Croesus grabbed her arm firmly.

“You *will* help me out...right?”

“A-Ah! Having you stare at me from so close up is...kind of embarrassing...”

“Oh? Your face seems to have frozen up all of a sudden. Anyway, what do you say?”

Croesus got closer and closer, an intimidating aura hidden behind the smile on his face.

Yi Ling tried to step back and run—but Croesus still had a hold of her arm. There was no escape.

“*Nooo!* There’s no *way* you’ll be done in ten loads! You’re gonna *break* me!”

“You can take it. You’ve got more stamina than I do.”

“No no no no no! No way! There’s just no *waaaaaay!*”

Yi Ling pulled with all her might, desperately trying to get her arm free from Croesus’s grasp.

Croesus, meanwhile, refused to lose what would be precious man power for the task ahead.

The two pushed and pulled, both refusing to give in, which sent them tumbling onto the sofa in a tangle of limbs.

They fell silent.

They stared into each other’s eyes, locked in the position they’d fallen in—

almost like that of two lovers just about to do the deed.

For some reason, they remained like that for a while, not saying anything. They had no idea whether a whole minute had passed or only a second, but it was turning into an increasingly awkward silence.

“Wh-Wh... What are the two of you doing?”

“Heeeey, Croesus. I wanted to ask you...to... *WHOA?!'*”

“Serina?!”

“Makarov?!”

And now, the two of them had been caught in the act.

“Croesus? I kind of suspected something, but that’s just not on...”

“S-Since when have the two of you been in that kind of relationship?!”

Croesus and Yi Ling responded together: “I-It’s not like that!”

“A-And... Um... I-It sounds like you’ve got a lot more energy than I thought. ‘Ten loads,’ she was saying... I know she’s got beastfolk blood in her, but even then, she’d— Yi Ling could break from that...”

“*What?!'* Croesus, you bastard, you always act all, ‘Oh, I’m not interested in women,’ and you’re out there doing *that?!'*”

It had turned into quite the misunderstanding. Serina was blushing and becoming increasingly incoherent as her misunderstandings spiraled out of control, while Makarov was jabbing forward a tightly balled fist with his thumb between his index finger and middle finger as he cried tears of blood.

“You’ve got the wrong idea. I was just asking her to help me carry some books to the library, and—”

“And you got carried away and pushed her down on the spot, huh?! Just ‘cause you got horny all of a sudden... You animal!”

“S-Seriously! It’s a misunderstanding! It really *was* just an accident...”

“Yes, I’m sure it was. One of the foolish accidents of youth, as they say... Were you at least using protection?”

Croesus and Yi Ling both reached the same conclusion at once: “They’re not even listening to us, are they?”

It took a while of frantic effort for the two to even just *calm down* Serina and Makarov. But that wasn’t the end of it; from there, the two “witnesses” only got more and more carried away, continuing to speculate wildly. Ultimately, it took about three hours to get the two of them to accept the truth.

By that time, both Croesus and Yi Ling were completely mentally exhausted. While they’d *sort of* gotten the other two to accept their story, the parting comments from them had been “Mmm... Okay. I get it. You want us to just leave it at that, right? Don’t worry; while it might not seem like it, I *am* an adult woman. I can be discreet if you want me to” and “I’ll let ya off the hook with that for today! But, hey, Croesus—let me in on the specifics later, eh? I wanna hear how it felt! In detail!”

It seemed like the misunderstanding hadn’t been resolved after all.

By the next morning, the rumor that Croesus and Yi Ling were lovers had already spread. Those around them only saw their denial as an attempt to hide their embarrassment, and some were too jealous to even listen to what they had to say. It looked like they’d failed to keep things under control.

There was no telling what would happen between the two of them down the line...but for now, at least, Yi Ling didn’t seem all that unhappy with the situation.

Meanwhile, Croesus understood that whatever he said at this point would be futile. He promptly went back to holing up in his room, and nobody saw him for days. Ultimately, he was a few days late returning his books to the library.

*

Five days later, Croesus came to the academy’s great library—also known by some as the “paper mountain” due to its vast quantity of books.

His reason for going was, of course, to return those books that he still hadn’t brought back.

Thinking of how many trips he’d need to make back and forth between his research building and the library to return them all, he could do nothing but

sigh.

He was the indoor type to begin with, not one to take the initiative to go and play outside. And whenever he wanted to enjoy some time to himself, he'd usually just read a book in his room while drinking some tea. So he wasn't exactly looking forward to the real combat training that would be held soon for the academy's top-ranked students; as usual, he'd begun to whine about how they'd gotten to "an annoying time of year."

Perpetually uninterested in anything but research, Croesus was seriously thinking about boycotting this annual event. He was tall, and he *looked* like he should have had some level of physical strength, but in reality, he was so unathletic as to be considered hopeless at anything sports-related. He was staunchly the stay-at-home type—that was part of why he'd put off returning all these books in the first place. He didn't even want to *think* about something like going off to hunt monsters in the name of "combat training."

However, he *was* one of the academy's top-ranking students, which meant that his participation would be compulsory. He'd have to take part whether he wanted to or not.

Certain rumors said that he had a brilliant mind, excellent grades, transcendent beauty, incredible athleticism, and his family pedigree to boot, making him essentially a perfect superhuman. But society wasn't really aware that he was closer to being just another shut-in. He was just being judged by his appearance—a pitiable position to be in, even when the rumors were positive.

Croesus's gait was about as heavy as the book-laden cart itself as he slowly pushed it along.

"Phew... Finally, I've made it. They really should've built this place closer... It's just so inconvenient."

Grumbling as he entered the library, Croesus saw laid out before him tables and seats for perusing the library's materials. It was class time, though, so there were no students in sight. Actually—scratch that. There *was* a student. Just the one. One Croesus didn't want to meet.

Sitting there was his half brother, Zweit.

Zweit was buried in a mound of books, seemingly looking into something. He'd occasionally scribble something down on a bit of paper with a pen, then direct his gaze back to the books. That was a surprise to Croesus, who remembered him more as the type of guy who'd go, *Magic's all about POWER! Mwa ha ha ha!* Certainly he wouldn't be diligently poring through books to gather information like this.

In the first place, that had been Croesus's misunderstanding. Zweit just wasn't the type who wanted to be *seen* putting in hard work; he actually had a rather stoic personality in that sense. The only reason Croesus hadn't learned that until now was that he spent all his time holed up in his own room, which had never given him the opportunity to actually see Zweit putting in the hard work.

Just went to show how indifferent Croesus was to his surroundings. But even then, he figured that, having seen his brother here, he probably *did* have to at least greet him. So, with a gloomy look on his face and a sigh escaping his lips, he headed over.

"Oh? It's not often I see you in a place like this. I was sure you'd be off at your faction's usual armchair theory sessions."

"Huh? Oh, it's you, Croesus. I'm giving those a break for a while. I destroyed all of their stupid excuses for plans, and it turned into an internal argument, so... Yeah. I've been banned from entering."

For a moment, Croesus thought, *Hmm?* He didn't remember his brother being this easy to approach.

"Jeez, who's the prick that's been borrowing *A Complete Collection of Ancient Magic Formulas* and *Rosena Celeste's Theory of Magic* for so long?! All the magic formulas in the books here are just modified versions, dammit..."

"Oh. That'd be me. They should be buried somewhere in a pile in my room."

"*Tch...* So it was *you*? Guess it makes sense. No wonder the books are still missing."

Even as Zweit talked, he didn't lift his gaze from the book he was going through. It left Croesus bewildered. As far as he knew, Zweit wasn't at all the sort of person to be engaged in magic research like this.

“What’s happened to you all of a sudden? Are you going to start devoting yourself to research now?”

“I was given a bit of homework. I’ve just gotta modify our heirloom magic to make it easier to use...”

“Homework, you say? Don’t tell me it was from Grandfather? Or Father?”

“No, from Teach. Our master. Celestina learned the basics from him too, and now she’s got people saying she’s a prodigy.”

“Wha—?!”

Having a master while you were a student was something that every mage longed for, and there were many who went on to achieve greatness after receiving guidance from an excellent mage.

For example, if you apprenticed under Creston or another mage of great repute in the country and got them to recognize your talent, there was a good chance you’d end up getting appointed to an important post. But to even get to the starting line for that, you had to show the appropriate talent and grades at the academy; in other words, top grades were a prerequisite if you wanted to be accepted as an apprentice.

Croesus couldn’t believe that Zweit and Celestina had gotten themselves a master.

“Who did you even have teaching you? Was it Viscount Nagus? Or Marquess Uthmeier, perhaps?”

“Croesus... What I’m about to tell you is a secret of the Solistia ducal family. Not a word of this to anyone—you understand?”

“So he’s *that* impressive? I suppose he did teach ‘the failure’ to use magic, by the sounds of it...”

“That’s top secret too. The kind of thing we can’t even tell the king. It’d be a big problem if it went public. There’d be an uproar.”

Zweit was looking uncharacteristically serious. He had the expression of an earnest, dutiful man; it was hard to believe that this was the same person who had just recently been so full of himself. Croesus braced himself for whatever

he was about to hear.

“I’ll listen. I’m part of the Solistia house too, so if it’s something relating to our family, I have a duty to hear it.”

Zweit thought it over for a moment. And then: “All right.”

Zweit scanned his surroundings, making doubly sure that there was nobody else nearby.

Then, to be even more certain, he scanned with magic, considering the chance that someone could have set something up to let them hear what was going on inside the room.

“I’ll get straight to the point: the man who taught us isn’t famous at all.”

“What?!”

Zweit’s answer seemed preposterous, given the buildup.

“While everyone was going home over the summer holidays, a carriage with Grandfather and Celestina in it got attacked by bandits. And our master’s the mage who saved them. None of this can be made public—by his own wishes. His power’s off the charts, by the way.”

“Just...hold on a second. It doesn’t seem right that there should be such a big need to keep quiet about some no-name mage. What sort of person *is* he?!”

“The problem is that mage’s job—he’s a Great Sage. I’m guessing you have an idea of what’d happen if word of that got out, right?”

“Wha—?! Certainly... Never mind the other nobles, I imagine even the king himself would set out to scout him, wouldn’t he...?”

The way jobs worked in this world was that those who had gained some sort of skills would have the job that best fit them displayed on their status screen. It was a title recognized by the world itself, and the majority of people had a strong inclination to carry out that job, so it’d be fair to say that it was a person’s life’s calling.

Within that system, the jobs of Sage, Great Sage, Saint, Saintess, and Hero fell under the umbrella of legendary jobs. If somebody with one of those job titles *did* appear, all the countries would be falling all over themselves to add that

individual to their ranks.

“The man himself says he just wants to live a quiet life. If we screw up and the state finds out, then worst case, the whole country could be destroyed.”

“Are you... Are you being serious? I find this all kind of hard to believe.”

“I’m serious. He rewrote all the magic formulas in the academy’s textbook! Could *you* do that? I know *I* couldn’t.”

“I see... So *that’s* why Celestina’s able to use magic now.”

A *Great Sage* had modified the spells. That being the case, he thought, it wouldn’t have been strange even for his incompetent little sister to learn magic. He figured he was starting to get a grasp on things now.

“I don’t wanna say it, but...apparently all the magic we’ve been using is stuff that was changed for the worse. That’s why Celestina couldn’t use magic—because there were problems with the formulas themselves. Or they were defective, I guess you could say. Apparently, while there *are* differences from person to person, magic’s something everyone can use. Which means we’ve been treating her like shit for nothing.”

“Hmm... So it *is* true. The magic formulas of today really *are* inferior to the ones used in ancient times. Meaning that people at some point went and broke something that was already perfected. That would mean that the points laid out in the heretical mage Sahacle’s *Lost Magics and the People Who Killed Them* were true. Regardless, weren’t *you* the only one treating our sister terribly? *I* simply wasn’t interested in her.”

Zweit took a moment to respond. “Doesn’t pretending she’s not even there make you worse?”

Both Croesus and Celestina were excellent in terms of magical theory and had reached essentially the same conclusion through their independent research.

“Well, Celestina ended up arriving at the same conclusion as Sahacle’s argument too. It looks like even if she wasn’t able to use magic, she was able to rewrite magic formulas.”

“Hmm. Perhaps I’ll have to rethink how I see her. It seems like my little sister

might have been brilliant all along.”

“Yeah... Not to mention, she’s stronger than you are right now. She’s gone through actual combat, after all.”

“It sounds like that Great Sage must be quite something. To be able to make her grow like that in such a short period...”

“No, he just puts a lot of focus on actual combat. He’s like you in some ways, and he’s your complete opposite in others. He’s a monster, a man who’s gotten where he is by testing out all his theories in combat.”

“That’s...a scary thought.”

Croesus and physical types like that were on complete opposite ends of the spectrum. He wasn’t good at dealing with that sort—the sort who’d try to forcibly drag indoor types like him outdoors. If this Great Sage was, as Zweit said, someone who focused on actual combat, it was easy for Croesus to get an image of him as someone who actively sought out battles and just used them to test out his magical theories over and over again.

“By the way, what sort of homework did that mage you’re talking about give you? I’ve got to say, I’m interested.”

“Like I was saying earlier—optimizing our heirloom magic. When we looked into its formula again, we found out it puts a huge burden on the caster, and just eats through their mana like crazy. Despite that, its power’s not even consistent, and its formula’s built so intricately that it’s almost like the creator was trying to mess with us. Whoever came up with it must have been a genius, and not in a good way. The second you even think about trying to optimize it, it stops activating.”

“That’s an even harder task than I was expecting... Wait. You can read magic formulas?!”

“Oh... Yeah. Teach hammered it into us over the last two months. We were practicing between lessons too, and we’ve been scouring dictionaries to help us with deciphering the language.”

It was at this moment that Croesus started to sorely regret the fact that he hadn’t gone home over the summer holidays.

At the same time, there was something about Zweit's words that piqued his interest.

"Did you just mention 'deciphering the language'? So the characters in magic formulas really *do* make up strings of words?!"

"Yeah. The words are used to represent the laws of physics, and they form sigils that work as circuits to help activate the spell. Also, it sounds like you were...*expecting* this? Does that mean you reached a similar idea by just studying things yourself?"

"I've definitely felt for a while like *something* was wrong with the theory being taught at the academy. It was probably about...two months ago, I think, that I started properly looking into it? Anyway, what you're saying makes it seem like my hypothesis was correct. Heh heh heh... What a great tip. This should let me take my research to the next level..."

Croesus was unable to hide his joy at this boost to his research. Not only that—the fact that the hypothesis he'd put together in his yet-unpublished thesis had been proved correct was giving him a whole new wave of motivation.

Zweit, meanwhile, was looking at his brother with a thoughtful expression.

"Croesus... Honestly, it looks like I was underestimating you."

"What's this? That came out of nowhere. You're creeping me out."

"Celestina and I are able to read this formula because of the guidance we got from Teach. But you've made your way here by just studying things yourself. That's a big difference."

It seemed like Zweit had grown a lot over these last two months. Perhaps it was also that his brainwashing had been lifted—but regardless, it was clear that he was now mature enough to honestly admit he'd been wrong.

"It's just a hobby of mine. I do it because I enjoy it, that's all."

"Watch out, though. You're the same type of person as Teach. You could be on the road to making something terrible."

"Something dangerous, you mean? What are you talking about?"

"You know wide-area annihilation magic? Teach can use it."

A cold wind blew through the silent library.

“Wide-area annihilation magic?! There’s no way! That’s not the kind of magic a person can use. It’d be impossible to even *activate* it with an individual’s mana pool; where’s that enormous amount of mana meant to come from? I refuse to believe it!”

“Think about Lugius’s *Natural Laws and the Occult*. That should explain it for you.”

“Wh-Wha—?! Are you saying he uses the mana from nature?! I see... I always thought that book was insignificant; I never would’ve expected it to hold the key to the truth. It seems like I still have a long way to go.”

“No, you’re impressive enough already. You’re more of a proper mage than anyone... Do you want to know how to decipher formulas?”

“Now that I’ve come this far, I want to see it through to the end with my *own* study. You’ve given me the answer I need—and I know now that it *is* possible to decipher them.”

In his head, Croesus already had a fair idea of what the method for deciphering the formulas would be.

All that remained now was to go back to his lab, check through everything, set up a magic formula, and try it out for real.

He wasn’t called a genius for nothing.

“Oh—I almost forgot. Teach said to give you this.”

Zweit held something out for Croesus. Croesus quickly took it and saw it was a silver-colored ring. On closer inspection, he noticed it had a pattern engraved into it: a magic formula.

The sheer intricacy of the design took Croesus’s breath away.

“Wh-What *is* this ring?”

“It’s a magic conduit. To be used in place of a staff. Teach said he wanted us to test how they feel to use. And he said he wants us to write down our thoughts in a report for him—if you could?”

“A conduit made of metal... Mithril, it seems. Intriguing. That’s a dreadfully intricate magic formula carved into it too...”

“Address the report to Grandfather. Teach’ll be able to get it through him.”

“Understood. I’ll put it together before too long and send it off.”

“Also, hurry up and return your damn books. There are people who *need* them, you prick!”

Croesus zoned out for a moment.

He knew it wouldn’t be an easy task to carry back that whole mountain of books.

However, he didn’t know exactly *how* much more time it’d take him to return them all. He was already exhausted from loading books up onto a trolley, bringing them back to the library, and repeating that process what already felt like far too many times; the thought of having to go through that however many *more* times had him feeling listless.

“I don’t suppose you’d be able to *help* me with that, Brother...?”

“I refuse. It’s your own damn fault for being irresponsible. Carry them yourself.”

Croesus hadn’t had high hopes, but he’d figured it was worth a shot. But with Zweit shooting him down as he’d expected, it seemed like he would, after all, have to spend the next little while doing the manual labor he’d so wanted to avoid.

“By the way, I heard something about you...about you living together with a girl?”

“Well, you heard wrong. She just sneaks into my lab and sleeps there without me even noticing.”

“Everyone’s talking about it, y’know? Saying the two of you were clinging to each other naked... Ugh. You’re making me jealous, you asshole.”

“Oh? Jealous enough to cry tears of blood, are you? Still, no. It’s just a misunderstanding.”

Croesus had no idea that his older brother was still nursing the wounds of a failed love. Zweit was very much seeing the world through the filter of those bitter tears.

“Must be nice, huh... Seems like spring’s come for fucking *everyone*... Maybe I should try and screw over all those lovey-dovey couples, huh?”

Zweit was flying into a jealous rage, and his brother found it to be rather unsightly. Pathetic, perhaps.

“Who’s even spreading these rumors, anyway? I’d like you to tell me, if you could.”

“*Hmmm?* Oh, it was that guy I was in the middle school division with. I think he’s part of your faction? What was he called again... Uh, was it Macaron or something?”

“Makarov, hmm? I see, I see... Heh heh heh. Now, what should we do about that, I wonder...”

“You really *are* the same as Teach, huh?”

Croesus went back to pushing along his trolley full of books, flashing a dark smile as he disappeared between the rows of bookshelves.

Zweit watched him walk off, then turned his gaze back to the books in front of him.

Under his breath, he muttered: “Guess *he’s* changed too, huh...”

Croesus had never been the type to show any interest in other people before. He might’ve treated others with a smile on his face, but it’d never really registered in his eyes. He was indifferent enough that he’d always just seen Zweit, his own blood brother, as little more than an ornament; he’d never bothered to remember other people’s names, and simply spent all his time reading books. That was the kind of person he was.

Zweit had noticed this behavior and felt it was unpleasant; it’d given him a poor view of his brother.

Now, however, Croesus didn’t seem to be quite so cold as before. In their discussion just now, Croesus had actually been properly *looking* at his brother—

and Zweit had noticed that. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like Croesus had realized it himself yet. But it was never easy to notice those sorts of changes in yourself.

“Is it a woman after all? Is that it? Is he changing for his woman? Shit... Why everyone but *me*?!”

Spring was coming, it seemed, for everyone but Zweit—who was still in the middle of a romantic winter himself, desperate for love. He might have been brainwashed until recently, but Luceris *had* been very much his type, so his experience with her had wounded him more than you might expect.

“Bremait... I won't forget what you did to me. I'll get you back sooner or later, I swear.”

Zweit's broken heart had worked him into a rage, and it seemed like he was directing that rage squarely at Bremait—the student who'd used brainwashing magic on him.

Realistically, this was just Zweit taking his anger out on the young man. But at the same time, it wasn't exactly unjustifiable.

Whether springtime would eventually come to Zweit, nobody knew.

Chapter 4: The Old Guy Goes to His Part-Time Job

The middle-aged mage was troubled.

Ever since he'd gotten back from his mining trip, he'd been spending all of his time making tools.

He'd recently installed metal cylinders underground—each something like an oil drum, but three times bigger. Three of them were fitted side by side, forming the rice silo and dryer that Zelos had been striving to create.

Using magic formulas he already had, Zelos could control the temperature of this setup with ease, ensuring that the rice inside was always kept at the ideal temperature.

Zelos had used similar technology to make a refrigerator, as well as a pedal-based threshing machine and a portable ashtray. The whole process had left him euphoric. But it was here that he noticed a fairly significant oversight:

“I don't have any rice!”

Indeed: while the rice here *did* grow very quickly and could be harvested seven times in a year, that didn't mean it grew *instantly*. The rice plants in his field had still only grown to about ankle height; it was going to be another few weeks before Zelos could harvest any rice. It was all well and good that he'd hurried so much to make his tools, but seeing as it was still going to be a while yet until he could properly *use* those tools, it had ultimately been utterly pointless for him to have been in so much of a rush.

The joy of discovering rice had caused Zelos to get rather ahead of himself.

“Well, I guess there's only so much I can do. Maybe I should go and look for some koji for now.”

Koji was a type of mold used in fermentation, and it was essential to make things like miso and soy sauce. It could be used to create a fermentation starter. The trick was to then keep cultivating that fermentation starter, keeping it close at hand without letting it die.

By the way, Zelos had already started testing his hand at getting yeast, another organism used for fermentation, through the laomian sourdough method. This had been fairly easy, since they were already baking bread at the orphanage; but still, Zelos would need the all-important koji if he wanted to move on to making sake and miso.

Zelos resolved to go and find some koji, and opened the front door.

“So what’s got *you* so busy?”

“Wha—?!”

Or at least, he’d *intended* to go and find some koji. But as he opened the door, there stood the carpenter, Nagri.

No, he was more than a carpenter. To be precise, he was a professional engaged in all aspects of the building trade.

“Don’t you *wha* me! I’m pretty sure we asked you to do some work for us starting today, eh?”

“Ah... That thing about laying the foundations for the bridge, yes? Was that today?”

“Yes, we’re starting this week! I told you that last time we met!”

“Give me a more specific date for that kind of thing, please. How am I meant to know when you want me if all you tell me is a vague ‘next week’?”

“O-Oh. Didn’t I tell you?”

“You did not.”

There was a lack of mutual understanding here. When crafters in this world referred to “next week,” they were usually talking about the following Monday; if they meant some other day, they’d generally specify it. But that wasn’t the case for a Japanese salaryman. A phrase that meant one thing to a crafter, who worked with rough estimates, might mean something *entirely* different to a salaryman, who scheduled everything right down to the minute.

“Well, whatever. You already promised to help us out a bit, so you’ll be coming with me now.”

“W-Wait. I was going to be using today to lay the foundations for making myself all sorts of—”

“Laying foundations? Perfect! That’s just what we want you for. We’ll make good use of you, all right? It’s a big job, after all.”

“That’s not what I meant... *Argh!*”

And so the middle-aged man was pressured into work by Nagri. The poor thing.

Most crafters here were the self-motivated sort. As long as there wasn’t some sort of accident on-site, they were always eager to go about their jobs, and they accepted no compromise.

By the way, the foreman at said site was Nagri himself.

Today, as on most any other day, the workers from Hamber Construction would be putting everything they had into a very high-energy day of work.

Getting a poor middle-aged part-timer caught up in it as they did...

*

Deep in a certain forest, a group of mercenaries fought against a monster.

GROOOAH...

Having used up the last of its strength, the forest grizzly died.

It was a giant bear, more than three meters in height, but it was also a proper *monster*, notable for having four front legs. In this country, it was classed as an intermediate-level monster—and the four mercenaries here had managed to defeat it.

“Damn thing, wasting our time... Especially when we’re on empty stomachs!”

“You got that right. And yeah, I *am* hungry... Been feeling stupid hungry a lot lately, for some reason.”

“You too, huh? I’ve been hungry like nothin’ else. Ain’t gettin’ any better, however much I eat...”

“Anyway, these things work like a dream, eh? Even if they *are* makin’ us hungry...”

None of the four were particularly talented as mercenaries, but their fortunes had really turned around over the past few days. Over that time, they'd taken on several supposedly dangerous requests of the sort you'd never usually be able to clear with just four people—like orc dens and armor lizards—and succeeded at subjugating them all. The men were growing stronger at such a rate that even the mercenaries' guild was astonished, and today, too, they'd taken on a spate of monster subjugation requests and cleared them all.

Their success was all thanks to the amulets that a certain mage had given them at the tavern. They looked like simple things, just silver hunks of metal with a dull black stone of some sort embedded in each—truly boring in appearance.

Pouring mana into these amulets, however, gave the men an unbelievable surge of power.

Originally, amulets were meant to be magic tools used for defense. A lot of them would grant elemental resistance or deploy a magical barrier.

However, the amulets these men held instead granted them abnormal levels of power—at the cost of rendering them helplessly hungry. However much they ate, they just couldn't feel satisfied. And that hunger was getting worse and worse as time went on.

"I'm so hungry..."

"Yeah. This is hell..."

"I wanna eat..."

"Hey. That thing...looks tasty, doesn't it?"

The men were looking at the corpse of the forest grizzly.

Ultimately, they couldn't win against their hunger pangs. All four of them set off running toward the corpse simultaneously—and once they reached it, they started biting right in without even taking it apart first. They tore off hunks of flesh, slurped at its blood, crunched on its bones, and even then knew no respite from their appetites.

In just a short period of time, the forest grizzly had disappeared completely.

All that remained were some bloodstains.

“Not enough... Not *enough*...”

“I need more... Gotta eat...”

“I want more food... I don’t care what, just give it to me...”

“Food... *Fooooood!*”

The four men’s conditions were getting worse, and quickly. At the same time, their muscles began to swell, tearing their clothes and exposing their now extra hairy arms to the air. The veins on their faces had come to the surface, and their arms too—no, their *entire bodies*—were transforming into those of different creatures altogether. What stood there were not humans. They were *former* humans now; beyond that, it was hard to say.

One of the creatures began to lurch its way forward in a certain direction. The others followed behind before long.

Waiting at the end of their path was a little village. The same village that had made the subjugation request for the forest grizzly.

The mercenaries—who had now fully turned into beasts themselves, drooling rivers of saliva—suddenly broke out into a run and launched a surprise attack on a house.

Before long, that little village was filled with screams. Anyone who moved was attacked indiscriminately, their bodies then eaten by the malformed, gluttonous creatures. The things were dominated by their boundless hunger.

That day, almost all of the village’s nearly two hundred inhabitants were killed, *devoured*, in the attack by the mysterious creatures.

There weren’t even twenty survivors.

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Inside the forest stood two suspicious-looking figures, each wearing the same completely black outfit.

One of the pair was using binoculars to keep watch in a certain direction from atop a tree, observing what transpired and writing down a detailed report.

What he saw through the binoculars were the figures of the four mercenaries.

“How’s it looking?”

“Hmm... Within expectations, I guess?”

“Wait! What’s *that*?”

The man looking through the binoculars was shocked by the extent of what he saw.

“What?”

“They’re *eating* the damn forest grizzly. No... *Consuming* it?”

“Well, I can’t see them. So just get to the point.”

“Th-The humans have... Th-They’ve turned into *monsters*...”

“What?!”

The hands that held the binoculars were shaking. The sheer repulsiveness of the sight the man had just witnessed had him trembling in fear.

“Sh-Shit! They’re coming toward us!”

“Wh-What?! Don’t tell me they sniffed us out?!”

“Run for it! We don’t have a chance against them!”

The two retreated in a hurry. As they did, they scattered about felscent, a forbidden concoction that attracted monsters.

Their idea was that by drawing in monsters to cause a commotion, they’d be able to protect themselves from the *other*, unnatural beasts. Before long, the monsters that lived in the area gathered together and engaged in grotesque battle, all killing and eating one another.

Those who had started the commotion used it as a distraction to desperately run away.

*

Those two weren’t the only ones who’d been surveying the situation.

One more individual was using magic from atop the trees to watch the figures of the mercenaries who had turned into monsters.

“Whoa. This is horrifying. Who would’ve thought it’d work like *that*... Looks like I’ve made something terrifying, huh...?”

The mage, clad completely in black, spoke with amazement—and a hint of remorse.

“If push comes to shove, I can dispose of them myself; it’ll be a pain if *those* guys spot me, though. Anyway, jeez, those side effects... I feel like I might have a hard time if I *did* try to handle them myself.”

Even the black-clad mage, who’d made the amulets himself, hadn’t expected them to result in such a grotesque sight. Somehow, he’d have to defeat these monsters and retrieve the amulets—and so he started to plan.

“As much as they might be the targets, I don’t have anything against the citizens... Seems like I’ve accidentally done something outrageous here. The effects seem *horrible*. Shit!”

As he voiced his bitter feelings, the black-clad mage disappeared from the scene.

Some time later, he would have a chance encounter with a certain someone. The time when the two mages would meet each other was slowly drawing closer.

*

“Y’know, I was... I was meant to have a few days off...”

“I know how you feel. I was dragged along here myself. The schedule’s too vague; it’s a bother.”

“Right? I was just about to make me favorite—mekkala beans—and have it with a good drink. Then all of a sudden, Nagri shows up, hits me with a real good shot to me solar plexus...”

“And what, you were in the carriage when you woke up? That’s terrible.”

“I know, right? I’d even finished soaking the beans, and I was *just* about to start cooking ’em. The guy’s a demon.”

Zelos was in the moving carriage, making small talk with a rarity—a beardless dwarf.

Having traveled by carriage for three days now, a crew from Hamber Construction—along with Zelos—was just about to arrive at the site where the bridge was to be built. However, having been dragged along before he could make any preparations whatsoever, Zelos just sat in the carriage with nothing but an excess of spare time.

Apparently there were already construction materials at the site—the problem was that efforts to build the foundations for the bridge piers weren't going smoothly, making it impossible to proceed with building the rest of the bridge. The reason that Zelos had been hired for the project was that the dwarves hadn't yet managed to master Gaia Control, his construction spell; he was there to work on the foundations in their stead.

“The fact that he didn't give a specific day for starting work is bad enough, and then he suddenly dragged me along with him, so...yeah.”

“Well, it *is* a tough job. The guys from the other territory have failed at it a bunch of times. The lord of the territory over there made these big claims about what he was going to do; at this point, ‘Sorry, we couldn't build it after all’ ain't gonna cut it.”

“And so they turned to Hamber Construction, out of everyone, as their final hope for getting the thing built... Sounds like a mess.”

The dwarf sighed. “Me mekkala beans... Me soul food...”

“Looks like you're really sad about missing out on that.”

Mekkala beans was a dish similar to chili. It was basic, countryside cooking, relying on the harmony between the spiciness of the chili peppers and the sweetness of the beans. There were more luxurious versions that included chicken and various herbs to give the dish a deeper taste that made it famous as a perfect accompaniment for alcohol.

“By the way, I hear vegetables around these parts here grow very quickly. But is it really that amazing?”

“It's 'cause the Far-Flung Green Depths are nearby, you see. From what the mages say, it sounds like the mana running through the ground makes 'em grow faster.”

I see. So the land here's sitting on top of ley lines...

"Anyway, I gotta say—rare to see a mage like you carrying swords around. Don't you lot usually use staves?"

"The thing is, magic's not omnipotent. There are some monsters out there that can nullify magic—and when you're up against something like that, you don't have much of a choice except hand-to-hand combat."

"Couldn't you just retreat? Same if your mana runs out—just retreat for a bit, then come back and settle the score later, right?"

"If whatever you're up against lets you retreat, sure. But you can't always rely on something like that in the middle of a battle."

It was only battles between nobles and royals that had clearly defined rules of engagement; those rules meant nothing to your average commoners or mercenaries. A lust for bounties would drive mercenaries and the like to strive for notable deeds in battle, and so they'd specifically concentrate their attacks on mages or noble officers and get quickly out of control if they captured a city. Similarly, things like laws and military regulations only bound official armed forces and other such bodies that directly served the state; those who'd simply been hired for money had no such rules. Or even if they did, most of those rules were intentionally overlooked in times of emergency.

Once, back on Earth, Zelos had been waiting in an overseas airport for a flight connection, when he'd gotten stuck in the middle of a fight between the national armed forces and terrorists from a certain other country, preventing him from leaving for about three days.

He'd ended up in a hotel designated as an emergency shelter—but when he'd tried to rest there, a stray bullet had flown through the window and only narrowly avoided taking his life. Fortunately for him, the bullet had just grazed his shoulder, but after that, Zelos—or Satoshi Osako, as he had been known at the time—had refused to go on any more overseas business trips to that certain gunpowder-filled region.

Both on Earth and in this new world, conflict was inevitably an inconvenience to third parties who had nothing to do with it, and rules meant next to nothing.

Earth had its fair share of long, dragged-out wars—and based on that, it seemed reasonable to assume that this world, too, got caught up in fierce conflicts, however positive people’s intentions might be. And when any such war *did* break out, the scariest individuals were always those drawn in by the mere concept of conflict, those who delighted in violence for its own sake.

It wasn’t just knights that were pressed into taking part in wars here, but civilians and mercenaries as well; the Order of Knights and the Order of Mages made up only a small minority of the total fighting force. Most soldiers were conscripted civilians, and it seemed entirely unlikely that the Order of Knights would be able to properly control all of those untrained combatants.

Most of those who committed barbaric acts were indeed those conscripted civilians and mercenaries. It was one thing if they were on your side, but if they were your *enemies*, you could expect them to pursue you without end. They wanted to distinguish themselves in battle and put the money that came with that distinction toward their lifestyles—so even if you retreated, you weren’t necessarily safe.

“You’re talking about some pretty complicated stuff, eh? You ever get told you’re a little twisted?”

“All the time. People say I obsess too much over things, or that I’ve got a screw loose; that kind of thing.”

“This country’s peaceful, y’know? Even if the mages *are* a little too big for their boots.”

“About half of the nobles here are mages, after all. The more peaceful a society is, the more it can make people rotten. I’m just hoping that doesn’t end up having any negative consequences for *me*.”

I do feel like part of the Order of Mages is likely to do something stupid at some point, though...

Ultimately, just thinking about it wouldn’t help much. But Zelos, who’d ended up in an entirely different *world*, wasn’t so easygoing as to simply accept everything and push it to the back of his mind. A lot of his crazy actions were, in fact, driven less by a logical *I’ll do this to defeat my enemies* and more by a sense of *this is scary, so I’m going to reduce everything to rubble*. However

powerful he was, Zelos was still just an average middle-aged man at heart.

He tended to see the ducal family through a similar lens too, becoming easily unnerved by thoughts like, *If I underestimate them, they'll take advantage of me.*

The problem was that he himself wasn't necessarily aware of his own thought processes. For now, he was simply going with the flow, ending up wherever life took him.

"Oh! I can see it now. That's our worksite. Over there."

"By the way, I haven't got your name yet. Sorry, I know it's a bit late to be asking."

"Me? The name's Boling."

The name made Zelos picture a split in a bowling alley, with a bowling ball hitting a pin on one side at just the right angle to send it flying off toward the opposite pin. It was something he'd seen on a bowling show on TV before. Given the dwarf's profession, though, perhaps it would've been more fitting for him to imagine someone in the act of *boring*.

"Were you thinking something rude just now?"

"No, no, it's just your imagination. Anyway, I'm—"

"You're Zelos—the lad I've heard about from Boss, yeah?"

"'Lad'?!"

"Humans can't live as long as us dwarves. In me own eyes...aye, you're still just a little lad."

Apparently, the dwarf here was older than Zelos. It was hard to tell the age of a dwarf—or of any of the other spiritkin peoples, for that matter.

The worksite was a wide highway upstream along the Aurus River. The highway had already been paved with stone, but at a certain point, it just stopped. That was probably where the bridge was meant to begin. The problem, however, was the foundations.

Even from a distance, Zelos could hear the sound of the raging river, so he

guessed the current must be fairly strong. And as the group got closer to the river to see the state the worksite was in, they peered over the edge of a cliff to see ferocious rapids.

Will magic even be able to do anything about this? That's quite the current...

"Two rivers join together upstream, so the current's pretty fast. Reckon you'll be able to do anything about it?"

"Nagri... You really have taken on a pain of a job, haven't you? If we don't do a good enough job of building the piers, this could all be washed away by the rapids."

"The public office's quote was naive, eh? Still, this is a request from the state! Didn't exactly have the right to say no... Jeez, getting this sorta absurd job pushed onto us makes my head hurt."

"Weren't you the type to send royals and nobles flying with a punch if you weren't happy with them?"

"Sure, if we're the ones who accepted the job in the first place. But it's not like we're the only ones under contract for this."

If Hamber Construction were the only company involved, Nagri probably *would've* sent the government official flying aside, before proceeding on to the king.

However, if *other* players from the construction and engineering sectors were involved, any responsibility for his actions could end up being pinned on them as well.

Crafters all had relationships with each other, even if they worked for different companies. There was a strong sense of kinship between them, and they'd often go out of their way to help even someone from another company.

What do I even do about this? Even if I wanted to try and build the piers, it seems impossible when the current's like this! I could try collecting up some sand and earth, but it'd probably just be washed away before I could even use Gaia Control or Rock Forming. Well, for starters, I guess we can get some proper, secure foundations built into that hard bedrock, huh? But when the current's this strong...

“Looks like I might have to make a composite spell here. Though I’m not sure anyone *else* would be able to use it...”

“Can you? I know I’m asking for a lot. But—please! Help us out, whatever you can do!”

“Give me three days or so. I’ll do my best to improve my magic.”

I don’t have my buddies with me in this world, so I’ll have to make something work using the formulas I’ve already got. In which case, I’ll have to link multiple spells together and tie them up into a single process... Timewise, I can’t afford to put it off. Should I pull an all-nighter starting tonight? What to do, what to do...

The fury of nature had even Zelos in a tough spot. But if he sat back and did nothing, it was the crafters who’d be punished for it.

“I want to give whoever came up with this job a good thwack to the head.”

“That’d be the lord who controls the entire opposite shore. Name’s Earl Yokubucano. Always trying to cut corners on costs whenever he can. Oh—and it’s an order from the king too.”

“Is there any point in even building a bridge here? Boats are more than good enough for trading with the Duchy of Solistia, I’m sure.”

“No—no point at all, honestly. It’s too much of a detour for merchants to bother taking it there and back. Even if it’s finished, it’ll probably just turn into a place for bandits to do their thing.”

“Is he perhaps embezzling the construction funds? And just pinning the blame on us if he screws up...?”

“Ahh... Yeah, seems like something he’d do. Still, I think he’ll end up in the red once the bridge is finished, you know? He’ll be the one responsible for managing the damn thing and keeping it safe.”

This location—which was on the opposite shore of Earl Yokubucano’s territory—was apparently something of a gray zone between that territory and the Duchy of Solistia. There was no noble in charge of managing it; it was just a neglected piece of land.

If you kept going upstream, you’d reach a corner of the Far-Flung Green

Depths, and the strength of the monsters would be on a different level.

So building a bridge here also meant increasing the risk of being attacked by strong monsters.

“It seems possible that he hasn’t thought through anything, and he’s just blinded by the chance at profit. That’s just a theory, mind you.”

“Not a *bad* theory, though. That’s the kind of guy he is.”

“Well, whatever his motives are, he sounds like a real piece of work, considering the ludicrous expectations he’s forcing on crafters...”

“You got that right.”

If this were back in ancient times, it’d be one thing. But in *modern* times, this world hadn’t had anything resembling convenient construction magic.

In the midst of that, Zelos had introduced construction magic of his own...but even that wasn’t enough here. It was getting clearer and clearer just how much of a nuisance this job was.

“So, how do you mean to get this thing built?”

“Let’s see. I’ll try to cast some magic on the hard bedrock and create foundations for some oval-shaped bridge piers. With a sharp, pointed end on each side so that they don’t take the pressure of the current...”

“Good, good! Sounds interesting. Couldn’t that make the piers too thin, though? We’ve built stuff like this before, but if the piers get swept away here, it’s all over, you know?”

“How many piers are in the plans?”

“Two. Oh—*now* I see. So you’re going to build more than that, so that there’s less of a load on each one?”

Nagri started revising the design, writing down his plans for the construction process on the diagrams.

At some point, the other builders started gathering around and joining in. They made quick work of revising the plans and calculated bridge strength on the spot to make the bridge even sturdier than the old design. The discussion

continued until sunset.

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The initial design had been for a triple-arched stone bridge supported by two piers.

The foundations were to be topped with arch-shaped bases to distribute the center of gravity, and then on top of those were to be the main body of the bridge. But it was almost two hundred meters to the opposite shore; there was no way two piers would be enough to prop up a bridge over that distance.

The bridge would need, at least, *four* piers—and taking into account the technology that had existed back in Zelos’s old world, he decided to give the sides of a piers a rough texture. This texture would help to agitate the current of the quickly flowing river, making the current just a little bit gentler. It would also disperse the stress placed upon the piers, helping to extend the bridge’s life, and reduce the risk of the ferocious waters causing damage downstream.

While the dwarves’ magic would at least be capable of connecting the piers to the foundations, the one *creating* the piers would be Zelos, at least this time around. And failure wasn’t an option, so it was a big responsibility.

“We’ll need a similar foundation for agitating the current on the other side of the river too. Might be easier once we’ve got everything in place,” a dwarf remarked.

“Can we do that ourselves?” another asked. “Could maybe look into it after the piers are made.”

“Yeah. Was thinking that myself. Anyway, using the flow of the water to control the current... I’m pretty damn impressed. That’s a proper mage right there—good head on his shoulders.”

“Where *is* the mage? Can’t see him.”

“Said he’s going to decide what spell will be the best bet before he uses it. Worst-case scenario, apparently he’ll try and use one spell after another, but he says he wants to be as careful as he can.”

While most of the dwarves were inside the temporary lodging, chatting

among themselves, Zelos was out with Nagri getting started on the work.

“About how deep do you think the water is?”

“Uh, let’s see... Five gheel, I’d say?”

A gheel was roughly equivalent to a meter.

“Think it’s like six or seven gheel in the deep parts. Couldn’t tell you how far to the bedrock, though.”

“I have a decent grasp of the work process, but it’s my first time doing this, you see. The whole thing could just collapse if I’m not careful, so if at all possible, I want to succeed on my first try. It’s not exactly an easy job.”

“If it takes a while, it takes a while. It was an unreasonable request in the first place; it shouldn’t be a problem if we go a bit past the deadline.”

Zelos had already decided on what sort of spell he’d need to make. In order to create the piers, he’d first need to enclose the areas where the piers would go with steel plates, then drive steel stakes into the bedrock to use as supporting posts. From there, he’d need to remove any water from the area, secure those supporting posts with steel girders, make a mold for the shape of the bridge piers, and pour cement.

For now, there were no supporting posts, no cement, and no molds, so he’d have to integrate all of those processes into a spell. He’d obstruct the flow of water using oval-shaped magic barriers while simultaneously using the bedrock and nearby sediment to build the piers, then use Rock Forming to secure them in place from the bottom up, one by one. The unknowns at this point were how much mana that spell would consume and how fast it would be at creating the piers.

A double activation of Divine Silver Barricade, simultaneous use of Gaia Control, and then Rock Forming... I can already see it’s going to be a pain to make the formula for that.

The job was shaping up to be harder than they’d been expecting. Enough to trouble even Zelos.

“Three different spells at once... That’s no joke. It’s not like I can’t do it, but

it'll be a tough one, you see..."

"*That* bad? Don't know that much about magic, but..."

"I can use magic for the barriers to protect against water pressure, as well as the barriers to serve as the molds for the piers. But the tough part is, I don't know how much of a load they're going to come under from the water pressure. And the more water pressure there is, the more mana the spell's going to consume."

The amount of mana required for barrier magic scaled with the force of the physical impact the barrier was blocking. With a strong enough force, you could run out of mana in a flash.

In most cases, that impact was an arrow or a strike from an enemy—something that only lasted for an instant.

But when that "enemy" was a raging river, things were different. Even if little mana was consumed by the initial impact, that impact just kept going, so the caster might be unable to keep up and would eventually run out of mana. While it was possible to draw mana from the natural world, maintaining that still required the use of some amount of mana from the caster—not to mention, Zelos would still have to manage the other processes at the same time.

"I'll make the piers as sturdy as I can, but they'll be pretty rough, if that's okay?"

"Not sure I can let that slide as a crafter. Why do you say that?"

"I *do* have my own limits, as the one using the magic. I can get the stone and earth to build the piers from the sediment flowing along the river, but actually trying to put all that together into a single form is kind of..."

"Oh—so you can't keep up, is that it? Guess magic isn't *that* convenient."

"If I had some kind of large-scale equipment to assist with the work, it'd be convenient, mind you. But no such thing exists here. If only there was someone who could make it for me..."

This job was a pain—one that was making Zelos complain.

If he'd had his computer from back on Earth, he'd have been able to take a

proper look at things like the structure and the water pressure it'd be under, and the task of creating the construction magic would be made easier too. But here, now, he had no choice but to formulate construction magic using just the existing magic characters. He himself possessed the formulas for the necessary magic, so that'd be fine, but there was no knowing what sort of harmful things could result from tying together and reconstructing already perfected magics. There was a need to construct several processes with magic characters, and in this particular scenario, the sheer volume of the magic formula it would require was so much that Zelos was unsure whether he'd be able to properly control it or not.

Even if I pull an all-nighter to make a prototype, then update it afterward, schedulewise, three all-nighters is going to be the limit, I suppose. Maybe building some pillars upstream to agitate the current would reduce the burden here a bit... When's the last time I had to deal with a crunch like this, I wonder?

"I'm begging you! You're the only one we can rely on."

"Please don't put so much pressure on me. I'm more timid than I look."

"What about you is timid?!"

From an outsider's perspective, it looked like Zelos was living his life rather carefreely. But inside, he was always racked with anxiety. Living in another world tended to put a pretty big burden on your mind.

Still, despite his mumbled complaints, Zelos got to it, determined to give his all to creating the new magic formula.

Chapter 5: The Old Guy Has an Encounter

The first rays of light were making their way into a dark room in Hamber Construction's temporary lodging.

Zelos had been hard at work throughout the night, keeping several candles lit and, when that wasn't enough, using magic to add more light. He took a casual glance out the window and saw a soft light beginning to fall over the wide forest nearby, indicating that the curtains of night were slowly rising.

"Oh. I guess it's morning, then."

Zelos had spent long hours putting everything he had into trying to synthesize a new spell. And while he wasn't yet *done*, he was starting to get somewhere, at least.

Next would be the cycle of testing the spell out and then adjusting it as necessary, over and over until it was perfected. But he wasn't sure yet whether anyone would actually be able to *use* the spell he was making.

He was trying to combine a double activation of area-of-effect barrier magic with magic for manipulating shapes, manipulating the earth, and hardening that earth; it was going to consume a lot of mana. Even if he used mana from nature, it'd be prioritized toward collecting and hardening the sediment; the caster would need to use their *own* mana for actually maintaining the shapes of the barriers and piers.

Trying to use that magic in the midst of a raging river would also add water pressure to the equation, putting far more stress on the barriers and further increasing the spell's mana consumption. And the stones, pebbles, and other detritus being swept along by the river would strike the barrier as well, making it even harder to maintain.

It'd be all well and good if he could just let them in—but if he did *that*, he'd end up unable to maintain the barrier.

"One way or another, I guess I've just gotta try using it..."

That was the conclusion he'd reached. But still, the thought of testing out the spell in his current state didn't sit right with him—and so he lay down on the spot. After all, if he didn't get at least a *bit* of a rest, it'd be that much more likely he would make a mistake when he tried to use the spell.

It wasn't long until the sleeping breaths of a middle-aged man could be heard coming from the corner of the room.

*

"*Hmm?* You wanna test your magic upstream first?"

"Yes. I'm just about done with incorporating the elements I'll need, but the problem is, I'm not sure yet whether it's actually practical to use. So I shouldn't jump straight into trying out the bridge itself...but at the same time, I can't answer any of my questions unless I give the spell a try *somehow*."

Having slept for about three hours, Zelos had gone to ask Nagri for permission to test out the spell a bit first.

Construction workers here put a lot of value on the work process, so there was a tendency to refuse even the slightest of delays. Sometimes, in certain situations, delays *could* be permitted; but at the moment, Nagri probably wanted to get started on the job as soon as possible.

Still, it'd be a problem if the magic the whole project was relying on turned out to be flawed.

"Well, I s'pose I *did* say you could have three days, but... The spell's *done*, yeah?"

"It is, but it's still rather rough around the edges. I don't think I'd be able to use it for the real thing just yet. I don't even know how much mana it's going to consume."

Nagri might've had his pride as a builder, but Zelos had his own—as a former programmer. In programming, a single typo could potentially have ramifications on an entire project. So back in the day, Zelos had hired numerous people as testers, and he'd spent every day staring at his screens and working to fix the bugs they identified. At the same time, he'd sometimes had to attend presentations overseas as a representative of the company's projects—and

because of that, he'd fallen behind on that work and needed to pull strings of all-nighters to catch up. It had gotten him into countless arguments with his bosses.

Magic, too, was a type of programming; a single mistake could affect how the entire spell worked. It was essential to test things out along the way and check how they were working—especially with spells like the one Zelos was making, which were made up of several different formulas combined together.

“Why *upstream*, though?”

“If I put some pillars upstream, they'll disrupt the flow of the water. That should make the current slightly calmer before it gets here—which in turn should make building the bridge quite a bit easier, I think.”

“Hmm. Also means that if someone *does* fall into the river here, they'd have a better chance of survival.”

“Perhaps, but... Promise me you won't push anybody into the river *on purpose*, okay?”

“What kind of man do you think I am?! At most, I'd tie them to a rope and lower them down into it.”

Nagri still hadn't forgiven Yumboh for stealing his food. Yes—he was still holding a grudge over the same spicy fried boromoro ball he'd mentioned back when the dwarves were building Zelos's house.

“Still, though, you sure you're good to go upstream by yourself?”

“I'll manage. It's not like I'll be going all that far, anyway.”

“Well, if you say so. Sure you'll be fine. Just come back as quick as you can.”

“All I'll be doing is trying out my magic a few times. It shouldn't take me too long. Anyway, I'll head off and get started now.”

“Gotcha. Watch out for yourself.”

Still looking slightly tired, Zelos set off for his trip. The entire construction project could very well be riding on this little test, so he was under a lot of pressure.

The thought left him feeling a tad gloomy as he followed the river upstream.

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Zelos had traveled awhile upstream, but the current of the river was just as strong.

It was still raging, violent; he found it hard to imagine that disrupting the waters here a little would do much to make them calmer downstream.

“This is... Well. It is what it is. I guess I’ll try and build some piers anyway.”

Zelos activated the formula for his new composite spell. Walls of light formed amid the rapids, and he expanded them out. At the same time, sediment and pebbles were drawn up from the riverbed and used to make the beginnings of a pillar, which was gradually formed into a predetermined shape inside the double-layered shields.

The pillar was shaped into an oval with pointed ends, which grew wider as it got closer to the riverbed. Furthermore, the sides of the pillar were intentionally given a rough texture, which created a convection effect that disrupted the flow of the rapids. With that alone, however, the pillar would probably just collapse as soon as Zelos’s magic ended. And so the Rock Forming part of the spell took effect, condensing the sediment and rock to turn it into an integrated stone pillar.

Even if mana was changed into a physical phenomenon, it took no time at all for it to start turning back into mana and dispersing. However, the solidified sediment and rock generated heat from the pressure—and with that *heat* then binding the different materials together, the pillar would remain intact even after the spell’s effect wore off.

In other words, any *secondary* physical phenomena that weren’t directly caused or altered by mana were just reactions within the laws of physics, so they would remain as is even after the mana from the spell dispersed.

That separated them from phenomena that were caused artificially by magic, and meant that the pillars here wouldn’t collapse. The only problem was:

Damn, that uses a lot of mana!

The amount of mana required to operate what was essentially three spells in one—and to properly activate their formulas—was even higher than what Zelos had been expecting.

As someone over Level 1,800, Zelos had an absurdly large amount of mana.

However, the average person in this world was under Level 100, and usually by quite a bit. Being over Level 300 was enough to mark you as very impressive.

And as a result, the average mage's mana pool was only somewhere around 250.

"I feel like even a mage on Creston's level would only be able to use a spell like this once, huh... There's no one out there who'd be able to use it properly."

Even Creston, the Mage of Purgatory and the former Duke of Solistia, was only Level 303 himself.

The thing that made the spell *that* expensive—so expensive that even a mage like Creston could only use it once—was the double activation of Divine Silver Barricade.

While you *could* change the shape of Divine Silver Barricade however you wished, that freedom came with a lot of extra mana consumption. And that was without considering any boosts to your abilities that occurred under special conditions like Limit Breaker, Criticality Breaker, or Zenith Breaker.

These phenomena were unlocked when your body's level and your skill levels reached certain points, causing all of your capabilities to significantly improve. They'd roughly double an individual's capabilities—and the more skills you had, the better your chances of reaching Criticality Breaker or Zenith Breaker. Actually getting to that point required quite a lot of training, but it *was* feasible to get there if you kept defeating monsters.

At this point, however, that sort of secret knowledge had been lost to time, disappearing from the world.

The damage caused by the Dark God War—and the political fallout that had led countries to implement policies of staying within safe zones in the period thereafter—meant that there were no longer the same opportunities that had once existed for people to reach impressively high levels. Society's decision to

give up on trying to reclaim dangerous lands had caused the average of people's levels to drop lower and lower over time, their skills and techniques stagnating, and ultimately, humans as a species had become considerably weaker than they had been in ancient times.

Not that that had any bearing on Zelos, of course.

"I suppose I should test it out a bunch of times as practice before the real thing? After all, I can already see Nagri giving me a real beating if I screw up the bridge..."

And so, Zelos got on with some good, honest training. Even if the cigarette hanging out of his mouth didn't exactly paint the picture of a diligent student...

*

The Aurus River was filling up with pillar after pillar.

Each new pillar disrupted the fast-flowing river more and more, making it visibly gentler downstream. It had always been a rapid section of river, difficult to travel, so ships tended to take detours via separate rivers to head to different cities.

Farther upstream, meanwhile, was a different country—one with a history of invading down this very same river about a hundred years ago. But Zelos, who was completely unaware of that, was inadvertently preventing that history from repeating as he got carried away filling the river with pillars.

"I don't want the water to wear them down too much. Let's add a little something..."

Zelos etched a complex magic formula into one of the pillars, then modified a magic stone to absorb mana from the surrounding environment and embedded it into the pillar. Essentially, he was turning this pillar sticking out of the river into a magic tool.

Getting into a good mood now, he did the same thing to the other pillars, turning them all into rather mysterious-looking objects with geometrically patterned surfaces. Now they'd be able to collect mana from their surroundings and use that mana to maintain strong barriers. The barriers wouldn't last *forever*, but they'd at least prevent the pillars from falling apart anytime soon.

With that done, however, Zelos was starting to think that the pillars were looking a little *dull*. So, largely just for fun, he started to form rocks on top of the pillars, then turn those rocks into sculptures of griffins and all sorts of other creatures. Once he got going, he couldn't stop—and the longer he went, the more intricate his designs became. Eventually, he was making things in shapes as intricate as mecha suits, including some from a certain super dimension fortress. Not to mention a Valkyrie for good measure—and not in the “Norse battle maiden” sense of the term. Then he went with a diva here, and a magical angel over there—just whatever came to mind.

But right as he was getting thoroughly engrossed in his efforts, he felt something odd.

“A monster? No, it's too...”

Zelos had detected a silhouette moving on the opposite shore. And as he focused his gaze on it, he made eye contact with a creature covered in bristly hair.

The creature's mouth resembled that of a dog, and it had a set of sharp fangs, dripping with saliva, as if it were starving. It had four arms and sharp claws, and its body resembled a human's.

Now the beast had spotted Zelos too. As it did, it started to surge toward him, leaping from pillar to pillar to cross the river. All of a sudden, it was right next to him—and up it raised its sharp claws, preparing to come down in a ferocious swipe.

Zelos leaped back to dodge, taking a moment to get a better look at the beast's figure. But what he saw sent a shiver down his spine. Pushing through to the surface of the monster's flesh were countless human faces, some of them children. The faces were moaning and looking at Zelos with spite. He felt an instinctive sense of horror.

“Wh-What *is* this thing...?”

The monster pursued him relentlessly. One of its left arms wound up for a blow, and Zelos twisted to dodge it just before a fist slammed down on where he'd been standing moments ago. But as he did, the monster's *other* left arm came in for the attack. Zelos drew the swords from his waist and intercepted

the arm, cutting it right off.

However, it was like the beast didn't even feel pain. Without even flinching, it sent its first left arm straight back at him from that position, going for a backhand blow.

Again, Zelos cut the beast's left arm off with his swords. But it continued to charge at him, knocking him back.

"Agh!"

Thrown violently against a tree, Zelos lost his breath for a moment.

Zelos's physical capabilities were so high that a regular human would hardly believe they were even possible. But this monster—even if just once—had managed to hit him with an attack so fast that even *he'd* been unable to respond.

"Shit..."

Zelos deployed a Divine Silver Barricade in front of himself, hoping to counter the beast's mindless attacks. As it charged at him once again, it impaled itself on the barrier, which he'd covered with countless spikes.

Even then, however, the thing didn't relent. Its body riddled with spikes, it continued its charge, stretching out a right arm as if to try and grab Zelos.

"Air Burst!"

Zelos hit his opponent point-blank with an air spell, generating enough force to knock the creature back in the opposite direction. Its posture broken, it stopped moving for just a moment—and that moment left a fatal opening.

Expecting the thing to stand back up and come for him again, Zelos had deployed another defensive barrier before it could get itself back together. However, the monster wasn't coming. Instead, it had taken the two arms Zelos had cut off, and it was...*eating* them. What was more, the stumps of the arms Zelos were writhing with flesh—and in a flash, they started to regenerate.

The wounds inflicted by Zelos's Divine Silver Barricade seemed to be fading before his eyes too. But the flood of saliva dripping from the creature's mouth made it clear: the thing was starved to its limits.

Arms and legs were starting to grow from all over its body, turning its figure into something increasingly grotesque.

Its regeneration had gone berserk, creating such a hideous sight that even just watching it made Zelos want to throw up.

By now, several people's worth of upper bodies were growing out from the mound of flesh. It was about the creepiest thing imaginable, a picture of insanity, a terrifying image—but it was also the perfect chance.

"Chainbind."

A sigil appeared right underneath the monster, spawning countless chains that wrapped around its body.

The beast struggled furiously, trying to break out of the restraints. But before it could, Zelos followed up with another attack.

"Prominence Flame."

The monster was engulfed by a dazzling, red-hot ball of fire.

Zelos had figured that if the monster was going to regenerate, he just had to burn it faster than it *could* regenerate. And so he'd used a Prominence spell: a type of fire-based incineration magic. In ancient times, it had been one of a number of forbidden spells; nowadays, it had long since been forgotten.

Even as a stand-alone attack spell, it was so strong, so hot, that it was able to burn the enemy up without a trace.

The flame—hot enough that it was almost plasma—reduced the monster to ashes before it had a chance to regenerate. And so, the monster was gone. But there was something left in its wake: fear.

While it had only been for a moment, a monster had surpassed Zelos. It had proved that there were, in fact, things out there capable of killing him.

He'd been saved by the monster's bizarre hunger, but he didn't know *what* would've happened if it had kept fighting instead. For the first time, he was trembling in true fear. And it also was the first time he'd felt that his life was really in danger.

"I guess I was underestimating this world... Still, what *was* that thing? That

regeneration wasn't normal..."

The Regeneration skill that some monsters had was a useful one, but it also brought unusually strong feelings of hunger. Often, then, it came hand in hand with the Mad Warrior skill. Regenerating lost arms and legs involved forcibly inducing processes like rapid cell division, which required a lot of nutrients. So to make up for the nutrients they lacked, creatures with the ability would sometimes go on a rampage, attacking anything in sight and trying to eat it to make up for their lack of nutrients.

This monster, it seemed, had *absorbed* the other living things it had eaten. And while it seemed to feel no pain and exhibited fearsome physical abilities, it was constantly starving in return. It had been in a constant state of nutritional deficiency.

It seemed like the creature's improved physical capabilities also made it expend calories more quickly; and every time it did something, its muscles were destroyed, requiring it to constantly regenerate them. It was stuck in a vicious cycle: it devoured prey to feed and supplement its abilities, then destroyed its own body just by moving, forcing it to constantly regenerate...which would again consume all of its nutrients, leaving it starved.

Most creatures with the Regeneration skill were things like orcs and ogres. The thing Zelos had just defeated, though, was neither of those. What was more, he'd never even *heard* of a monster with human faces sticking out of it.

Don't tell me... It was eating people? How many people would it have needed to...

Zelos broke out into a cold sweat.

"Oh? So you managed to kill it. That leaves three more, then."

"Three mo— Wait! Who's there?!"

Instinctively, Zelos could tell that the person before him was no ordinary man.

"Who... Who *are* you?"

"Who am I, indeed? And do you even know who *you* are, I wonder?"

From the man's appearance, he was young—probably somewhere in his

twenties. However, he had an overwhelming presence that was different from anything Zelos had felt in this world before.

He was clearly a dangerous opponent.

“I’m not interested in some philosophical back-and-forth. The answer’s very simple...”

“Oh, so you’re asking whether I’m friend or foe? Very easy to understand. I like it. For now, I’d say the answer is...foe, I suppose?”

Zelos had never felt anything like this before in this world. It was his first time meeting a being so similar to himself.

“That monster. Was that your doing?”

“Well, well... I only came to see how things were going, but to think it would end up like *this*. I suppose there’s room for improvement. Anyway, it’s not the outcome I was looking for, but I can hardly just let a witness go freely...”

“I’m getting a real hunch that you’re a nasty piece of work.”

“Aha ha. I’d say your hunch is...*right!*”

All of a sudden, the mage’s form blurred.

His survival instincts kicking in, Zelos immediately drew his shortsword.

CLANG!

The echoing sound of metal against metal rang out as the two men locked swords.

It was the classic image: two fighters pushing their swords against each other.

“You blocked it! Aha ha...it seems I’ll have to be careful around you, hmm?”

“I’m getting old, you see; I’d really prefer it if people didn’t surprise me like that. What happened to respecting your elders?”

“That’s rich, coming from someone as monstrously strong as you. *Flare Lance.*”

“Flare Bullet.”

Zelos used the fast-forming Flare Bullet spell to intercept the Flare Lance the

other man had fired first. As the spells collided, the two men were engulfed in crimson flames—or so it seemed.

In actuality, both men had drawn back before the exploding flames engulfed them—then immediately closed the gap back on each other, crossing swords once again.

SCHWING! TING! CLANG!

Both swords flew fiercely through the air, each cutting into each other at unbelievable speed. But neither side was managing to wound the other. Both men understood: they were up against a dangerous foe.

“Well, aren’t *you* strong? At my age, about all I can do is keep up with you... *Air Burst!*”

“However old you are, you’re terrifying... *Air Burst.*”

BOOOOOOOM!

Released at almost the same time, the two Air Burst spells gouged out the surrounding earth and sent it flying, tearing trees from their roots and filling the air with dust. Both men had their vision obstructed—but they were still able to feel each other’s presence.

Black and gray figures tore through the dust, and their silver-colored blades collided once again, creating a whirlwind from the force.

“*Tch...* You really are something different. I figured any mage who could build pillars like that in the middle of the river here would be special, but this... You’re insane.”

“That goes for both of us, don’t you think? Anyway, isn’t it about time you tell me who you are?”

“Aha ha ha... You ask some funny questions, don’t you? Why would I ever do *that?*”

“Figured as much. At this rate, it looks like we’re going to end up in a battle of attrition...”

Even as the two of them griped at each other, they continued to make slashes that could potentially deliver a fatal blow—yet still, neither managed to land a

serious wound on the other. Each of them was truly a troublesome opponent.

“Looks like we’re both starting to get an idea of how the other fights. You *are* a mage, though, aren’t you?”

“That’s what I was going to say. Are you seriously a mage, fighting like this?”

Zelos knew that the sort of attacks his opponent had made so far wouldn’t be enough to defeat him. But at the same time, he was aware that he couldn’t let his guard down. Not only was each man crossing swords with the other as if he could predict his foe’s every action—neither one had had the opportunity to unleash his powerful magic.

It was possible to use powerful spells without an incantation. However, activating those spells would still leave you vulnerable for a moment—and both men knew it. That moment would be enough time for either man to land a fatal blow on whoever was trying to cast.

I’m beat... This is almost like I’m fighting myself. I just can’t land a good hit.

Zelos’s very familiarity with magic was exactly what stopped him from making a decisive attack.

Of course, sword skills and hand-to-hand combat skills were an option. But the black-clad mage in front of him wasn’t even letting him use those. Zelos too was continuing to prevent his opponent from using such skills—and so both men were just slowly whittling away at each other and biding their time.

Worse, the instant you activated a sword skill, your body carried out a predetermined set of movements—and both men here would be able to recognize those movements and intervene. It was the first time that either had experienced such a troublesome fight.

“Would you mind just giving up already, please? Honestly, you’re kind of a pain to deal with...”

“Looks to me like you’re finding it easy. But *I’m* the one who picked the fight, so I’m not sure you’d just stand there and let me run away... We’re not exactly friendly enough to trust each other like that, are we?”

“Well, you *did* just come at me with a sword out of the blue. So yes, I hope

you're at least prepared for a bit of *questioning*..."

"Aha ha ha. You really are a funny one, huh? But I'd like to skip the questioning, please."

"Yeah... Thought so. Urgh, this is such a pain..."

Each of them was a tough opponent for the other.

While it wasn't like Zelos had a grudge against the man, he *was* a dangerous enough mage to create the sort of monster Zelos had fought earlier. There was no way Zelos could just let him escape scot-free.

But at the same time, it seemed entirely pointless for the two of them to keep fighting like this. Their swords clashed time and time again, and yet nothing ever came of it. The stalemate made Zelos want to click his tongue.

"Heeey! You there?"

Both men were surprised by the sudden voice.

Someone was coming their way. The distraction left Zelos dangerously open to attack—an opportunity the black-clad mage wasn't going to squander. Zelos suddenly felt a vast amount of mana converging in the palm of the man's hand.

"Grand Superexplode!"

"Tch! Plasma Burst Destruction!"

KABOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Two ultimate magics collided head-on.

The sheer force from the impact assailed both men, who were blown back without a chance to even scream.

The earth rumbled, and Zelos was hit by countless stones and shattered trees. But by grabbing onto a large tree that remained intact, he was ultimately able to ride out the torrential power of the shock wave—albeit with all of his joints screaming in pain.

He coughed. "I'm...fine, I guess. But my whole body's numb..."

The entire area was covered with dust, preventing Zelos from getting a grip on the situation. If nothing else, he could see that a huge crater had been

formed at the site of the explosion.

He's...escaped, huh? I can't sense him anymore. Did he use some sort of item?

The black-clad mage was now nowhere to be seen. Zelos knew that he must have used the explosion as cover to retreat—but at the same time, it seemed unlikely he'd gotten far.

Still, even if the man *was* lurking somewhere nearby, there was someone else coming now. Zelos decided to give up the pursuit, figuring it wasn't wise to try and force the issue.

"The hell is *THIS*?!"

Shocked by the voice, Zelos turned around—and saw the figures of several dwarves, including Nagri.

"Oh, Nagri. What's the problem?"

"What do you *mean*, 'What's the problem'? You didn't even come back for mealtime, so we went out looking for you... What *happened* here? And those pillars—"

"They're prototypes I made for the bridge piers. But just leaving them there as is felt a little boring to me, so I thought I'd decorate them a bit."

"That's a lot more than 'a bit.' So you were just playing around, eh...?"

"Ah, well—I wasn't *just* playing around. The thing is, I came under attack..."

"An attack? So *that's* why the place looks like this! M-More importantly, are you okay? Not hurt, are you?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I got the chills, but I'm still perfectly all right."

"Right... That's good, then. Still, though, seeing these things is really whetting my appetite as a crafter..."

Attack or no attack, it was true that Zelos had spent most of his time here just indulging in his hobbies.

And the dwarves found the pillars he'd built—covered with magic characters and sculptures—to be something entirely novel.

While the dwarves seemed boorish and rough around the edges, they were

very well-versed in the arts. They were staring at the pillars with serious expressions on their faces.

“The sculptures are passable. But they don’t match the rest of the pillar.”

“Maybe you’re just not looking at it right? Sometimes it’s the flaws that make things beautiful.”

“You can see the lack of experience, but it’s not bad. If only the pillars were a little thinner...”

“Then they wouldn’t be able to stand against the current! Anyway, what if you made the sculptures smaller, and made the piers symmetrical by putting one on each side?”

“So you can see them from both upstream and downstream, eh? Aye, if you’ve gone to all the hassle of making sculptures, it’s a shame to only have them visible from behind.”

Somehow, the discussion had pivoted to the dwarves all judging Zelos’s handiwork.

“All right. Make one more of each sculpture and fix it so there’s one on each side. They can just be half as big.”

“Um... Are you saying you want me to do that *now*?”

“Of course. No way we can just let half-hearted work sit right under our noses like that.”

“You know, between the battle and my testing, I’ve already used up quite a bit of mana today...”

“Deal with it.”

Nagri was asking for the unreasonable. But it seemed like all of the other dwarves agreed with him. Their eyes all had an unusual glint to them too. They were serious.

“How many pillars do you think there even are? You’re asking a lot here!”

“Forty-five, right? Well, just go at it like you’re working yourself to death. You’ll manage.”

“Willpower isn’t enough to bring back my mana!”

The dwarves responded together: “Shut up and do it! Keep moaning any more and we’ll drown you!”

As crafters with perhaps a bit *too* much pride in their jobs, the dwarves were unwilling to let mediocre work slide, and forced Zelos to revise his handiwork. The amateur sculptures he’d made for fun were rejected, and great attention was given to every last detail. Compromise wasn’t in the dwarves’ dictionary.

Ultimately, Zelos got stuck revising all of the sculptures, frantically shaping one after another under the threatening, watchful eye of the dwarves.

By the time he’d finally finished, the sun was setting—and at that point, the dwarves’ angry voices were echoing inside his head.

When at last he got back to the temporary lodging, Zelos was completely drained. He’d already used up a lot of mana erecting the pillars and fighting, and then, to boot, he’d had to revise all of his sculptures, all while being subjected to a barrage of criticism.

It was his first time collapsing from running out of mana.

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Well, that was something... Never would’ve thought there was a mage like that out there. Makes sense he’d be able to take down that monster.

The black-clad mage had retreated from the Aurus River under the cover provided by the colliding area spells.

He’d thought he was a pretty high-level mage by the standards of this world, so he’d never expected there to be a mage more skilled than himself. Or rather, he’d expected that there might well be one out there, *somewhere*, but he’d figured there was only a tiny chance of meeting them.

That tiny chance, however, had suddenly become reality, and it had gradually evolved into an increasingly heated battle.

Well, given the thing turned into a monstrosity like that, I would’ve had to get rid of it as soon as I could anyway. The real problem is that he saw us. Or should I just be glad he saved me the hassle...? Still—jeez, that strength was on par

with the Destroyers. Actually, wait a minute...

It was here that the gears in the man's mind began to turn.

Hang on. The Destroyers? Don't tell me... Was he...that guy? No, there's no way...

The mage that this man knew was a slender, middle-aged, rather boring-looking individual.

Thinking back, however, there was a strange overlap between the behavior of that individual and the mage he'd fought just earlier.

Ah. That's right—it'd be his real body in this world, not how his character looked.

The man gradually started to notice his own misunderstanding.

Crap. If it really was him, I'll have to go apologize later if I don't wanna die... He was the type to hold a grudge more than you'd expect. Still, I don't even know where he lives. What should I do...

If the man he'd fought earlier *was* the mage he was thinking of, there was no knowing what'd happen to him if he didn't go to bow his head and apologize. At the same time, he still had things to do; he couldn't exactly go back and meet the man again right now.

If he explained his situation, maybe the man would help him out. But the man might also hold a grudge and send him halfway to the grave.

"Shit... What the hell should I *do*?!"

To apologize or to leave? That was the question.

The black-clad mage would spend a while alone in the forest, pondering over that concern.

In the end, he decided to prioritize what he had to get done, and left to meet with his companions.

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Three men were walking through the forest at midnight.

One was a man who'd been waiting on the opposite shore. The other two

were his companions, who'd used ropes to cross the river.

Those two had somehow managed to scramble their way back to the opposite shore—though they'd been covered in muddy water in the process. Still, it was thanks to their companion's guidance that they'd gotten this far.

"You've been quiet since earlier. How'd the experiment go?"

"Ah... Terrible. If we use that stuff wrong, we'll be putting *ourselves* in danger too."

"Was it really that bad?"

"'Bad' doesn't even *begin* to cover it! A *person* turned into a *monster*!"

They were observers who'd come to check the effects of the amulets that a certain mage had given to a group of mercenaries.

But the results had been beyond their expectations, transforming the humans into aberrant monsters.

The results that the man with the binoculars had seen were repulsive. Nothing like what had been planned.

"We used felscent to get away, but those things *ate* the monsters it lured in. Ate every last part of them."

"Forget about using that stuff. All it'll do is make us more enemies."

"We can make as much noise about it as we want, but ultimately it'll be up to the higher-ups to decide. And who *knows* what they'll say."

"You're right, but...the stuff's dangerous. We should be staying far away from it."

The men kept walking in silence. All they could hear was the noise of the ferocious river; there was no sign of any creatures in the vicinity.

Nonetheless, they proceeded with caution. And as they did, they spotted something strange at the bottom of the cliff: there was a line of pillars sticking out from the river, extending from the opposite shore. They were topped with brilliant sculptures, made with such workmanship that the men's breath was taken away.

But it wasn't long before that thought was blown away by another one.

"What *are* those? Pillars, sure, but what the hell's up with them?!"

"They've gone and done it now. There go our chances of launching a surprise attack."

"Did Solistia figure out what we're up to? Guess they're trying to not make the same mistake as last time, huh... We'll have to take 'em seriously."

The men belonged to the country that had previously launched a surprise attack on the Magic Kingdom of Solistia by coming down the river and attacking Santor. Nowadays, Santor was a city, but back then it had been a stronghold: the impregnable Santor Keep. The attack had turned into a fierce battle—though ultimately, it had ended with the attackers making a humiliating retreat.

At the time, there had been no country by the name of Solistia. But the story of this disgrace had been passed down the generations by the attacking country's royals, so even now, all these years later, the country was still hungry for revenge. Naturally, it had been preparing for war—but with these pillars now in the middle of the Aurus River, any attempt at a surprise attack would likely see the boats intercepted and run aground. Worse, the lead-up to the pillars was a fast river, so any boats would be unable to slow down; they'd probably run straight into the pillars, unable to avoid them. The river here was surrounded by cliffs too, making anyone stuck there the perfect target for attack magic.

In other words, you'd be heading straight into a meat grinder.

"We've gotta report this. And fast—or it might be too late."

"Mmm... There's no doubt about it. They know we're coming, and they're ready for us."

"Hey—what's that mess over there? It's almost like there was a battle..."

Their eyes had fallen on a bunch of felled trees, the site of an explosion, and a patch of earth that had been melted into mortar from extreme heat.

Whatever had happened here, it had apparently involved enough heat to turn the ground into glass. There was no choice but to assume that some very

powerful magic had been used. And then one of the men spotted something inside the crater.

“Hey. How many test subjects were there?”

“Four. What about it?”

“Look at this... It looks like one of them was killed here.”

A dull black stone had fused to the glass that was now the ground.

It was a stone the men recognized.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Are you seriously saying someone *beat* one of those things?!”

“That’s impossible... Those things slaughtered a whole pack of monsters! Devoured ’em!”

“*Look*, though. This is proof.”

When the other men saw the stone, their faces paled.

“But... A mage... Did a *mage* really beat that thing?”

“There’s no way. It’s not the sort of thing knights could defeat. Let alone a *mage*...”

“But this is clearly the aftermath of a magic attack. There must be a real master of a mage around somewhere.”

“Fire... Could it be the Mage of Purgatory?”

There were only so many mages who were masters of fire. And of those, the Mage of Purgatory was the only one they could think of who was skilled enough to do something like *this*.

“One of the four mages, huh... Does that mean there’s something past here that the country wants to protect so bad they’d drag that retiree out here?”

“No idea. But what I *do* know is, we need to look into it.”

“Let’s go. If worse comes to worst...”

“Yeah. We need to send back a report, no matter what. Even if only one of us makes it out alive.”

Having steeled their resolve, the men nodded at each other. And as they headed through the forest, they came out at a clearing.

They hid in the bushes to observe for a bit, and it didn't take them long to figure out there was a highway being built here. The thing was, this place was undeveloped land; it'd be fair to say it was in the middle of nowhere. It seemed utterly pointless to build a highway here.

"A highway? Why would they do something like..."

"Santor's downstream, yeah? Surely it'd be quicker to get there by boat."

"Wait. From here on's the Aurus River. Don't tell me..."

As far as these men were concerned, having a highway here was convenient. But this was a remote area. There was no city nearby to serve as an important transportation hub, and building a road here would seemingly just delight bandits. But surely no country would build something like that.

Holding their breath, the men moved along the riverside—and then, for the first time, they understood the point behind the road. The country was trying to build a bridge.

"There's no doubt about it. They're preparing for war with us."

"What's the point in 'em building a bridge here? It seems like just a waste of money..."

"Don't you *get* it? If they build a bridge here, our country's military's gonna be crippled."

The men came from a small country upstream, but to attack the Magic Kingdom of Solistia via land, they'd need to take a route through a country in between. The only other option was to send a fighting force on ships down the Aurus River—but now, the various pillars would threaten that, as would the bridge. The pillars upstream would obstruct the path of the ships, which, unable to control their speed amid the rapids, would crash into the cliffs or the pillars for sure.

As previously mentioned, the river was surrounded on both sides by cliffs, making it possible to unleash easy attacks from above. And even if the attackers

managed to somehow weave through the pillars, they'd then be putting themselves in the firing line of concentrated attacks from atop both the cliffs *and* the bridge.

In other words, the very terrain of the land here was being turned into a natural fortress.

It'd be reckless to launch an attack via the river now.

"This isn't good... They've gotten ahead of us. At this rate, we..."

"Yeah. We won't be able to get back our country's glory. Plus, those pillars have made the current here gentler, so they'll probably be able to come and go through here with boats now. Looks like they've got a real tactician among them."

"Yeah. Using the terrain to lay the foundations for prosperity... Must be quite the wise man in their ranks."

But it was just a coincidence.

"We'll have to postpone the attack on Solistia for a while. Start with annexing the neighboring country..."

"Any plan for a two-pronged attack's gonna be on hold now, though. Besides, the neighboring country's done a lot for us... Wouldn't be smart to make 'em our enemies. Plus, we'll have *that* lot putting pressure on us."

"Nothing to be done about it, then. Still, how'd they even think to put a trap like that upstream—and at the raging rapids just after another river merges with the Aurus, at that? The only thing I can think of is that they've got insider information on us."

"Whoever thought up this plan must have a real keen mind... Wait, was it that Duke Delthasis?!"

But they were wrong.

The men here, unaware that it all just stemmed from a coincidence, had no option but to infer whatever they could from the situation. Leaving aside whether those inferences were actually *correct*, all they could do was analyze what they saw in front of their eyes.

That analysis was significantly affected by their own personal perspectives, though—which brought them to their flawed conclusion.

In reality, this highway had been proposed as “a highway for civilians who can’t pay for a ship and have no choice but to travel by land.” Though with no towns nearby, any merchants traveling along it would be easy prey for bandits.

What was more, it was close to the Far-Flung Green Depths, meaning that any travelers would be exposing themselves to the risk of monster attacks as well.

Regardless, from the perspective of the men here who were planning to attack Solistia, the only possibility that came to mind was that the country was beginning to rapidly develop new land—and that the speed of that development was a means of keeping them, the would-be invaders, in check.

It was a good example of how coming at things from a different perspective could lead you to a very different understanding.

“Why’s it look like they don’t have any guards with ’em except for a single mercenary?”

“Probably because they don’t care if we see ’em. Not like we can do anything about it, after all.”

“So what—they’ve read us like a book, so they don’t even feel the need to hide what they’re doing? This isn’t like the rumors said. Solistia seems risky to mess with now.”

The men here had been sent out to ascertain both the Magic Kingdom of Solistia’s internal affairs and the results of the experiment. In their first investigation, they’d heard rumors of bad blood between the Order of Mages and the Order of Knights, and they’d considered it as a good opportunity for an attack.

But in reality, it appeared things were completely different—that Solistia was expanding into new lands to actively prevent any invasion.

With that being the case, it seemed likely that the rumors of strife within the country’s organizations were something that had been spread *on purpose*—a gambit, perhaps, to draw unsuspecting mice into a trap and route them when they arrived. Plus, the fact that the country was openly revealing such an

important site only served to make the men's mistaken conclusion seem all the more authentic to them.

It was all mere coincidence, of course—but the men here had no way of knowing that.

“Let's go. We have to report this to the homeland...”

“Yeah. If the higher-ups get tired of waiting and launch an attack, we'll just be headed to the slaughter.”

“There's a scary tactician somewhere around here. One who's good enough to enrich the country and destroy its enemies in a single move.”

The men were working themselves up into terror over a tactician that didn't exist. They were loyal soldiers, willing to lay down their very lives if it was for the sake of their country—but they didn't want to see their fellow countrymen dying in vain. They ran off into the dark night. All in the name of their country's prosperity...

This is a side note, but it was in another city, not Santor, that they had joined forces with the black-clad mage.

Chapter 6: The Old Guy Works

When Zelos had gone out to test out his new spell a couple of days ago, some very picky crafters had seen him making sculptures for his test pillars—and they'd forced him to fix every last little imperfection with them. It had turned into a hell of a job for the middle-aged mage, the dwarves yelling at him constantly as he worked through to sunset.

While the pillars had eventually become proper works of art, the task had completely exhausted his mana. He'd spent the whole day resting now, and it still wasn't coming back that easily.

"Oh. You're awake. Got your mana back yet?"

"Still only about a third of it. I used up every last bit I had, so it'll take a fair while to recover it all."

"Can you work yet, though? Kind of wanted to get five piers done today..."

"I should be fine as long as there's not a repeat of what happened a couple of days ago. If I have to revise everything again, I feel like I'll collapse for a full three days."

Nagri hurriedly turned his head away. After all, he was the one who'd asked Zelos to help out with this project in the first place, as well as the one who'd said, "No way we can just let half-hearted work sit right under our noses," and coerced Zelos into revising all of the sculptures he'd made. That revision was what had run Zelos's mana dry—and if the actual construction work for the bridge got delayed as a result, it'd be Nagri's fault for putting the cart before the horse.

He did realize, somewhere in his mind, that he'd gone too far. But if there was one thing you could say about dwarves, it was that showing them any sort of art or architecture flipped some kind of maniacal switch inside them.

It was like every dwarf had some kind of burning *something* inside of them—a passion that they simply couldn't hold back.

“I’ve decided to call the new spell ‘Base Request.’”

“Well, I suppose it fits. Anyway, you want a mana potion?”

“I’ll take you up on that, thanks. I’m still a little lightheaded, as you might expect. It should help me to recover, just a bit.”

Zelos chugged down the mana potion in a single gulp. It only helped him recover by a tiny amount, but it was better than nothing. For the record, while he only had about a third of his maximum mana at the moment, he still had enough to far outstrip the average mage.

“Right, then—let’s go. We’ll be relying on you.”

“I’ll do what I can. I just need to make something similar to what I made yesterday, right?”

“Aye. You got the width of the piers down pat? Can always check the blueprints first, if you want.”

“I’ll be fine. Anyway, shall we get going?”

Zelos headed to the cliff with Nagri, where he then held out both of his arms and deployed a magic formula to activate his new spell at the intended location. A single pillar of light formed on the water—narrow at first, but gradually expanding, pushing the water out as it did.

Inside *that* was another barrier, which would serve as a mold for the bridge pier. The spell gathered up the mud, stones, and all sorts of other things from the base of the river, and compressed them together at high pressure, causing the stones and sediment to generate heat. That heat caused the water inside to boil, evaporate, and escape.

A great surge of steam erupted from the river.

“Whoa!”

“Gotta hand it to mages! They sure can use their magic.”

“Once the piers are done, though... Then it’s *our* turn.”

“Hah... I’m itching to go!”

You could tell the builders had been waiting for this moment. They all had

massive grins on their faces, and they were rubbing their hands together in anticipation.

They had a serious case of workaholism. Enough so that they'd even been venturing out into the forest to hunt, leveling up in order to properly increase their mana pool.

Dwarves didn't just have the spirit of artisan crafters, but also the skills of natural-born warriors. They made full use of their strength and endurance—and now, the ones here could add elemental magic into the mix as well, making them true warrior-builder hybrids. Though of course, unlike combat engineers who served in battle, these dwarves' one and only reason for leveling up was to get better at building.

As the dwarves waited, Zelos finished building a second bridge pier. The sight only hyped them up all the more. It was like an electric shock was running through them, leaving them unable to hold back their urge to *create*.

"Let's go, you pieces of shit! Time to show 'em what we're made of! Hah hah!"

"Yeeaaaah!"

Letting their raging builder's instinct take the wheel, the workers headed to their positions, each burning with passion to carry out their role.

"First squad, come forward!"

"Yeeaaaah!"

"At the ready!"

"WE'RE WORKAHOLICS! WE LIVE TO WORK!"

"GO!"

"LET'S ROCK 'N' ROLL!"

A dwarf who didn't work was as good as dead. Any dwarf would put everything they had into their work, whether it was farming, war, or anything in between. As long as their heart continued to beat, they'd be filled with passion for whatever it was they did.

They were working as a group now, casting Gaia Control on top of the piers Zelos had built and joining them together to form the base of the bridge.

They made up for their small mana pools through numbers and teamwork, and when they eventually did run low on mana, they'd have a supply squad support them by passing them potions. They had a perfect system set up for casting as a group. Once the base of the bridge had come together, another squad cracked their knuckles, lined up, and cast Rock Forming before swapping out for yet another squad, who'd moonwalked their way over, carrying stones for the construction. That latest group then proceeded to fit the stones in the right spots.

The Gaia Control squad was in charge of piling up the dirt and forming it into the right shape—and its members were also the main dancers in this impromptu troupe. Showing off impeccable dance moves as they went, they came to the fore and built the base of the bridge. The Rock Forming squad members were the backup dancers, providing aid, while the supply squad behind the scenes kept the others supplied with potions while shouting out vocals.

Dwarves proceeded to pile up stones on each section as it was finished. Each time a dwarf placed one of the stones, which had been decorated in advance, they finished off by nailing a perfect headspin on top of it; it was a full-fledged entertainment show. And somehow, despite all this, they were doing their jobs perfectly.

Right before Zelos's eyes, a base was being built on top of his bridge piers in no time. It was the first time he'd seen anything like it; he was dumbfounded.

As Zelos stared, mouth agape, he saw Nagri send him a fiery look that seemed to say, *Oy! You do it too!*

Seriously...?

Nagri's eyes were *quite* serious. Zelos had no interest in the world of entertainment; it wasn't his forte. He pretty much only knew one celebrity—*that* one. And unfortunately for Zelos, he was able to pull off a rather decent impression of him, for an amateur. Enough so that he used to show it off at work parties at the end of each year...

“I-It’s show time!”

At first, he was only doing it to stop the dwarves from beating him up. But as time went on, he started to enjoy himself—and eventually, he was properly one of them. Now, the old guy was officially *Bad*.

Usually you’d expect something like this to delay the work. But the dwarves were getting things done at a remarkable pace.

Occasionally they’d run into a hurdle that seemed like it might grind things to a standstill. But then they’d work together to fix it in perfect synchronization, dancing all the while.

They had a diverse set of skills.

The construction work ultimately stretched from early in the morning all the way to sunset.

It was as if some sort of mysterious power had connected the hearts of Zelos and the dwarves that day.

Zelos and the dwarven builders continued to dance as if they were professional entertainers. Like prisoners finally released from their shackles—like fish returned to water—they kept at it for a few days, perfecting the base of the bridge. Dancing like madmen all the while...

Everyone at Hamber Construction was crazy in some way or another.

*

The next morning, Zelos woke up sore all over.

The bizarre construction dance had led to an entirely different kind of muscle strain than just farming. Zelos had really overworked his poor middle-aged body these last few days—and now, the strain was catching up to him.

“Ugh, my muscles... How are all of you fine?”

“Huh? It’s ’cause we’ve trained for this.”

“*That’s* enough to make you give up? You’re weak, lad.”

“He did have some nice moves for an amateur, though, eh?”

In other words, the dwarves danced like this practically every day. You

couldn't exactly call them regular laborers at this point.

“Really, though, dancing builders... Who knows *what* this world has in store for me next?”

Racked with muscle pain, Zelos gained a renewed appreciation of just how wide this world was. The dwarves with him didn't seem to feel any exhaustion at all from the previous day's work as they tore into their breakfast with gusto.

“Today, we'll be working on everything from the second layer of the bridge through to the main part, all at once. Get your blood pumping, knuckleheads!”

The dwarves responded with a vigorous roar.

It was the start of another day of both dancing and building the bridge. For Zelos, who still hadn't had the chance to finish recovering his mana, it was tough work. Still, apart from all the mad dancing, Hamber Construction worked in a fairly normal way. Every employee went about their own role, all working in the pursuit of overall efficiency. Even if they *were* beatboxing as they did so...

The dwarves responsible for stonecutting and decoration split off from those responsible for bridge-building, and got to chiseling and hammering.

Their handiwork made a sound like an eight-beat rhythm, going right to the listener's soul—and they tap-danced in time with the beat, creating an even more uplifting sound. The dwarves enjoyed setting this sort of festive mood—the tune both excited them and raised their morale, driving them to work with even more enthusiasm.

Zelos, meanwhile, was practically unable to move due to his muscle pain. He could feel nothing but astonishment at the dwarves' activity.

“How on earth are they doing this without causing any accidents? It seems dangerous however you look at it, and yet...”

The bridge was in a multiarched shape, with three layers. And the dwarves were standing right at the edge of the first layer—logs in their arms, no safety ropes—as they worked in time with the beat. They were putting the logs together to build scaffolding, which they would then use to get to the hard-to-reach spots to decorate them...but below them was nothing but a huge river. If this had been back on Earth, it would've been a flagrant violation of workplace

safety laws. It was almost a twenty-meter drop from the top of the cliff to the river; however much Zelos's upstream pillars from the other day had made the river here gentler, you wouldn't be getting off easy if you fell.

The current was still far too fast to swim against, after all.

"Oh! Hey! Hamber Construction chaps! Thanks for helping us out here."

"Oh, Meigher Construction! Nah, what's a bit of help between buds, eh? No need to act all distant!"

"We've come to give you all a hand too. Let's show that shithead of an earl what we can do!"

"We owe you one, Chubely Infrastructure!"

More and more builders from various companies were starting to come together. They were all good friends who'd worked with Hamber Construction before, and the lot of them often went out drinking together. They had an impressive information network, allowing them to catch wind of even the internal secrets of various nobles' territories. In short, they weren't the sort of group you wanted to make an enemy of.

Meigher Construction were the ones who'd initially accepted the job to build the highway. The request to build the bridge was something that had been forced onto them at a later point.

Their initial plan had been to go straight ahead, and to come out from Earl Yokubucano's territory to the duchy. But then the request for a bridge had been pushed onto them at the last second with no real justification, leaving them at a loss.

And it was a job from the state too, so refusing wasn't an option.

It was at that point that Meigher Construction had turned to Hamber Construction for advice, resulting in the latter taking on the job of building the bridge—which brought us back to the current day.

"That pathetic excuse for an earl... Looks like hitting him once wasn't enough for him to learn his lesson, eh? I'll have to half kill the bastard next time I see him."

“What’s the point of building a bridge here anyway?”

“Hell if I know!”

The state did have a proper motive for building the highway: the aim was to start developing a city on what was currently undeveloped land and use it to optimize the economy. Of course, that’d require a significant budget, but the state had found a mountain in the area that could be used to start up a mine, promising juicy returns if the project went ahead.

That was all still in the planning stage, though. For now, the thought was just that they might as well extend the highway out there while they had the budget for it.

If the rest of the development plan was passed, all sorts of crafters and merchants would end up using the road, which promised to make it easier to move goods back and forth. And it was that benefit that Yokubucano had set his eyes on, eagerly taking on responsibility for building the highway. However, the matter of the *bridge* was officially still up in the air; the decision to build it had been nothing but an executive decision by the earl.

Nobles were something like governors or mayors for whom the position was hereditary, but it wasn’t as if they had limitless authority. Even with hereditary positions, a noble could have their status taken away and given to another noble if the people’s approval of them got low enough, allowing that different noble to effectively steal away some of their social standing. If you wanted to rule over a piece of land as a noble for a long time, you needed to be properly responsible for the roles you were given...but it was common for up-and-coming nobles to make light of their roles.

Generally, noble titles were handed to those who had achieved something of particular note. But they often got corrupted by the power of their new status as soon as they received it.

Earl Yokubucano, for his part, was a third-generation noble. His grandfather had been a competent man, but he himself was an absolute fool, perhaps because he’d been spoiled in his younger years. He was sharp when it came to matters of money, but he was unable to make proper use of that knowledge for anything else. The Duchy of Solistia had pursued highway construction as an

upfront investment; Yokubucano's project was merely a clumsy imitation.

In short, the earl had taken it upon himself to *forged* the documents requesting a job by the authority of the state, despite the job being one that the state itself hadn't called for. That alone was more than enough for him to be given the death penalty...but the earl was so obsessed with thoughts of money and power, that hadn't even occurred to him. He'd completely done away with all of the specific procedures, moving purely as his greed desired.

If he succeeded, he'd be given honors. And if he failed, he could just take a penalty fee from the builders who'd undertaken the work—or at least, that was the plan.

Actually keeping himself *safe* hadn't even occurred to him. Even if the bridge *did* get built, it'd fall on him to pay the expenses, and the fact that he'd forged the documents requesting the job “by order of the king” would come to light.

If he'd gotten anything even *resembling* permission from the king, it would've been a different story. But having failed to do even something as simple as that, there was no way he'd manage to escape responsibility. For someone who could be shrewd in certain respects, he was behaving like a right moron here; it defied understanding.

Earl Yokubucano, by the way, was one of the nobles who'd previously ordered changes to building plans over and over again. It had been so bad that Nagri had gone ahead and *punished* him—before he'd stopped to think about how that *might* not have been such a good idea. Ever since then, the earl had viewed Hamber Construction as an enemy.

Clients who changed their plans so many times were hated. The problem with Earl Yokubucano in particular was that he took it to the extreme—which, as you might expect, had left Nagri unable to hold himself back. The dwarf had sent the earl flying off his feet, causing the man to hold an unreasonable grudge against him. It didn't help that the earl had made the builders decorate his premises in such a gaudy, tacky way, and then had *dared* to try and haggle down the construction costs. Even the most accomplished of crafters would inevitably snap.

“His younger brother's a bit better, mind you. But with *him* as head of the

family, they'll be ruined before long, I bet."

"You got that right. Well, just wait a bit, and that brother of his probably *will* end up as head of the family. At least he's a decent man."

"Should we hit him while we still can?"

It was an unreasonable job to begin with—but it was made worse by the fact that the person responsible for the supposed "order from the king" was only Earl Yokubucano.

There was no doubting it: if Zelos hadn't been here, this job wouldn't have even been possible. Even if the king *had* ordered it, the only proper thing to do would've been to report on the state of the site and call the project off. But despite that, the earl had gone and forced ahead the plans for building the bridge—and it seemed like there was going to be quite the bill to pay.

Especially given the scary glint in the builders' eyes. They were narrowed, glimmering like those of famished beasts. It seemed like the builders were really working up a grudge.

"Right. Let's go for another day, boys!"

Again, the builders responded with a loud roar.

They immediately split off to their positions, and got started on their respective tasks. While dancing, of course...

"So this really *is* going to start up again... Why are the workers from the *other* companies dancing too?"

"Everyone who gets involved with us ends up like that for some reason. Wonder why?"

"Are you really going to ask *me* that?"

Zelos took a cigarette out from his breast pocket, lit it, and watched as the building site turned again into one big spectacle.

*

Twenty or so people were running through the forest.

All of them were gripped by fear. The slightest sound of rustling leaves sent

them into a panic.

The group paused briefly to get a hold of their surroundings—and then, once they determined it was safe to do so, they set off running again. But suddenly, all that was in front of them was a cliff. Their expressions turned to despair.

“Hey! Over there!”

As the rest of the group turned to look, they saw a half-built bridge. Suddenly, they had hope—and that hope reinvigorated them.

“Let’s head that way. Before *that* thing catches up with us...”

All of them nodded and set off running together once again. Many of them were young men, or women with children, and their clothes were stained with blood and dirt.

One day, just recently, a pack of monsters with black fur had appeared and stolen everything from them. They’d killed most of the villagers, *devoured* them, in what had been the perfect image of a scene out of hell. All the villagers had been able to do was run—and even then, many had lost their lives in the process. Most of the people here had had their families killed: relatives, wives, children. While some of the villagers *had* taken up arms and tried to fight back against the monsters, it had only ended in tragedy for them.

Eventually, the group made it to the bridge and shouted out in the loudest voices they could muster.

“S-Somebody, help us! Please!”

The dwarves, who were hard at work building the base of the bridge, noticed the commotion.

On hearing the villagers shouting out in desperation, they used Gaia Control to form stairs and headed right to their aid. Seeing how haggard the group looked, the dwarves put a stop to their work.

Dwarves had a strong sense of moral duty; they decided to immediately bring the villagers to a rest area and get them something to eat. They treated the group’s wounds too, doing their best to protect them and show them hospitality. And as they did all that, they heard the full details of what had

happened.

“They’re in terrible shape. Where are they refugees from?”

“They’re not. Village was attacked by monsters, apparently. Said all they could do was run.”

“Monsters?”

“Aye, black ones, they said. Said the things were huge. That they ate people. That they transformed a bit more every time they did.”

That sounded a lot like something fresh in Zelos’s memory—the monster with abnormally strong regeneration that he’d fought just the other day.

It hadn’t had a sense of pain, continuing to attack him even after he’d chopped off its arms.

“Excuse me. How many of these monsters were there?”

“F-Four of them. They got my wife, and—” The man broke into tears.

Hmm. So if what that mage was saying was true... “So there are three more of those things out there, then...?”

“You know about them?!”

“One attacked me the other day when I was out testing my magic, and I defeated it. It was...abnormal, though. I’m not even sure you can call it a proper life-form. I was also attacked by a mage right after, by the way.”

The monster’s strength and regeneration had been far out of the ordinary. In exchange, it had been racked by a crippling sense of starvation—and remembering the sight was still enough to make Zelos shiver.

While it had only been for a moment, the thing had managed to match Zelos in strength. Perhaps it was the most powerful thing out there.

“So *that’s* the attack you were talking about the other day?” Nagri asked.

“And...did you say a mage? Sounds fishy to me. Anyway, you’ve beaten one of those things already, aye? Should be easy to take out the rest too, then, eh?”

“That’s not necessarily the case. They’ve got the numbers advantage—not to mention, that bizarre regeneration ability.”

“Like ogres or orcs?”

“Stronger than that. But in exchange, they’re constantly starving; they can’t stay alive unless they hunt without rest. Whatever they are, it’d be fair to say they’re failures as living beings.”

The core goal of any life-form was to survive and leave offspring. These black monsters, however, left behind nothing. They could do nothing but devour anything that moved, incorporate it into themselves, and *exist*.

“It might be best to call all of the workers back here for now.”

“Already on it. Made sure they’ve all got weapons too. Something’s giving me a nasty feeling here.”

“Those things don’t feel pain. Even if you attack them, they’ll just come charging right at you—keep that in mind.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding... How’d you manage to beat one, then?”

“I stopped it from moving and burned it until there wasn’t even ash left.”

Nagri’s mind went back to the crater he’d seen gouged into the earth when he found Zelos testing his magic the other day.

He remembered that the ground had been turned into glass and was radiating an impressive amount of heat.

“So *that’s* what that was... Must’ve been a pretty tough enemy to make you go that far.”

“Since it couldn’t feel pain, I tried to use every last bit of power I could—especially considering how fast it was able to regenerate. Honestly, it’s not the kind of thing I want to fight against.”

It had also given Zelos his first taste of how it felt to have his life in danger.

BONG! BONG! BONG!

All of a sudden, a metallic sound rang out. A dwarf had rung the alarm bell in the watchtower set up at the worksite.

“So it really *did* come...”

“Let’s go. Can’t have it messing up the worksite.”

Zelos and Nagri left the rest area together. Running to the bridge with a sense of urgency, they saw the figure of a humanoid beast, covered in bristly black fur, on the opposite side of the river. Perhaps it didn't have a sense of hearing; there was no sign it had noticed the sound of the alarm bell.

It did, however, have a sense of *sight*—and as it spotted the group, it set off running straight at them in a mad dash.

"H-Hwah?!"

"So that's the monster... All right, bastards, you ready to go?"

"YEEEEAAAAH!"

As the monster barreled toward the dwarves, they stared it down and started casting magic as a group.

"Gaia Control!"

Their magic manipulated the ground, which started to ripple like waves in water. When the monster reached the spot they'd targeted, it immediately got caught up in the melted earth, which began trying to pull the thing under.

"Now harden it!"

Another chorus of voices: *"Rock Forming!"*

The area immediately turned to stone, stopping the monster in its tracks. Despite struggling hard enough to break its claws, the thing was unable to escape from the ground, which had hardened to stone all around its body. Weapons in hands, the dwarves readied to go in and take it down.

Until...

SPLORCH. PLRCH. BLORP.

Letting out an unsettling noise, the monster tore off the top half of its own body, freeing itself from its trapped lower half. It was ready to continue the hunt.

"Th-This thing's an abomination..."

The bizarre spectacle left the onlookers stunned. Even as the monster tore off its entire lower half, it began to regenerate and close up the wound, and

numerous spiderlike legs sprouted from its back. It was such a grotesque sight, the dwarves found themselves unable to move, despite the danger.

Zelos, however, *was* able to move. He closed the gap in an instant—and just like last time, he hit the monster with Prominence Flame, then leaped straight back to dodge the fiery eruption.

The monster was engulfed by red-hot flames, and a foul smell permeated the area. Its body burned up before it could even scream, leaving nothing but dust that disappeared in the wind.

“Even I hadn’t expected it to be *that* bad. I certainly wasn’t expecting it to tear off half its body like that...”

“You’re telling me. The hell was *wrong* with that thing...?”

“I can’t imagine that sort of creature exists in nature. Perhaps it was artificially created, somehow...?”

“You saying someone *made* the damn thing?! They’d have to be one crazy fucker, if they did.”

As Zelos said, it wasn’t the sort of creature that would normally come to exist in nature. The chance wasn’t zero...but it was hard to believe that four of them would show up simultaneously, if that were the case.

Even then, by probability theory, it wasn’t *completely* impossible. But with four of the things around, it was an exceedingly tiny probability, that much was for sure. And when you factored in that they were all in the same area too, it started to seem more and more likely that these events were the result of some sort of meddling.

“Two left, then, huh?”

“Don’t jinx it, please. Though I suppose you’re not wrong...”

If there were still more of these unidentified monsters out there, nobody would be able to rest easy. After all, they were probably lurking somewhere in the forest just on the other side of the river, and there was no telling when they’d attack. It also forced the builders to put a stop to their bridge-building.

The dwarves glared over toward the opposite shore, annoyed looks on their

faces.

*

Hidden away in the dark forest, two monsters were locked in a fight.

Even if you were trying to be charitable, though, it wasn't a *proper* fight. They were simply biting into each other. *Eating* each other.

They had been humans once—but any traces of their humanity were long gone by now. Whatever they were now, they were tormented by starvation. Their ravenous hunger never abated, which only made them all the more feral. Their ridiculously strong regeneration was preventing either one from putting an end to the fight, forcing a prolonged battle. An arm was torn off. The arm was devoured. Entrails were ripped out. Devoured.

But the beasts, in their endless torment, had already reached their limits.

Their regeneration was no longer keeping up, and each one's cells were screaming in protest. Yet still, a potent source of mana continued to well up within them, keeping them from the mercy of death.

Eventually, one of the monsters' movements began to slow. The other twisted around its body, and tore into its flesh with powerful jaws and sharp fangs.

The sound of shattering bones and tearing flesh echoed throughout the forest. Finally, one of the monsters had succeeded in devouring its kin.

GRUOAAARRR!

The beast's guttural roar could be heard far into the distance. It absorbed the body of its former companion...as well as a small shard.

That shard granted it *further* power—and finally, for the first time, put a stop to the creature's hunger. The creature's body swelled to twice the size and continued to transform into something more and more detached from its old human form. And then, again, the overwhelming hunger returned—driving the creature to seek out its next prey once more. Large prey, small prey, it cared not; it would attack whatever it encountered, devour it, and convert it into more power.

As it did so, the creature reached a cliff by a river.

It could tell: on the other side of that river were living creatures. The thought drove it to let out a howl. Once again, it would strive in vain to sate its never-ending hunger...

Chapter 7: The Old Guy Finishes His Part-Time Job

RUOOOOOOOOOH!

A mighty howl in the dead of night woke Zelos and the others from their slumber. All of them brandished their weapons and assembled at the bridge.

Having known in advance that the worksite was going to be out in the wilderness, they'd all brought combat equipment with them. But knowing that they were unlikely to face any human foes, most had just brought equipment made of leather—in short, armor that was easy to move around in.

The dwarves each leaped out into the night as soon as they were dressed in their armor, while the others present prepared weapons for themselves in a panic. And as they all got outside, they spotted a beast with a huge frame howling on the other side of the river.

The upper half of its body was somewhat like a human's, but its lower half looked more canine than anything.

Protruding from its back was a sea of legs, layers deep, all writhing like a bed of insects. Its head, meanwhile, was stretched out like that of a crocodile, and didn't have any eyes.

Well, the *head* didn't have eyes, but the monster did—plenty of them, actually. But they were the eyes of the human faces that half protruded from the creature's abdomen, moaning and staring out with anguished expressions. Zelos wasn't sure if it was just his imagination, but he felt like he remembered seeing one of those faces somewhere before.

"That really the same kinda thing we fought during the day? It looks nothing like it."

"This is just my hypothesis, but...I wonder if it might've eaten the other one that was left? Which could have given it the power of two of the things, and made it turn into this... I mean, given their gluttony, they probably didn't have any food left, apart from each other."

“So they’re eating *each other*?! And they can absorb the power of other monsters they eat, you say...? Hang on. If one of those things ate a *mage*, then...”

“They might become able to use magic, yes. We can’t let our guards down.”

It was a common stereotype of fantasy stories. Usually, it would’ve been a preposterous suggestion; but here, at least, Zelos was correct. The beast he’d defeated the other day and the one from just earlier had both been the same size.

Even accounting for body type, humans could only be so different from each other in size. But the difference between the two monsters they’d killed previously and the thing coming toward them now was more than just that. It ran at a speed that belied common sense, and it was able to jump easily more than ten meters into the air. As it landed, its bones broke under its own weight—but even then, it simply regenerated at rapid speed.

“It’ll be here quickly. That speed... That’s going to be a threat.”

“That’s only if it’s got hard ground to spring off, though, right? We’ll try the same trick we used on the last one.”

Again, the plan was to turn the ground to swampy mud with *Gaia Control*, then harden it around the creature with *Rock Forming* to restrain it.

The beast ran on four legs over the incomplete bridge, clearing the ravine in an instant.

“Now! *Gaia Control!*”

“*Gaia Control!*”

The dwarves cast in unison.

“*Rock Forming!*”

At first, it seemed like they’d succeeded in restraining their foe. But then...

PLFCK. SPLORKH.

Using its four legs as springs, the creature jolted away from the ground with terrifying force—enough to tear its body clean away from its legs, though it had

already begun to regenerate. From the stumps of its old legs sprouted new ones, each protected by an insect-like carapace, as well as a pair of wings. It was like the creature was adapting to its situation.

“Wh-What? Again?!”

Nagri was astonished by the bizarre speed of the creature’s regeneration. And now, there were also countless snakes growing out of the thing’s abdomen and attacking the dwarves. Using them as whips, the creature managed to knock away even the sizable dwarven force.

Fortunately for the dwarves, their shields allowed them to avoid taking direct hits. But it had taken only a moment for those shields, forged from iron, to become horribly mangled.

“*Tch*. Everyone, get down!”

Without delay, Zelos drew the swords from his waist and began to chop off the snakes, which were writhing around like tentacles.

But as soon as he cut one off, another would begin to grow back in its place. There was no end to the things.

“Don’t mess with me! *Fire Lance!*”

The dwarves, meanwhile, concentrated their own magic attacks together, helping to engulf the creature in flame: “*Fireball!*”

“*Promine*— Huh?!”

The monster was enveloped in flames, but it was still unharmed. On closer look, Zelos saw that it had deployed some sort of transparent barrier around itself, protecting against his magic attack. The only thing making it through to the inside of the barrier was the heat, burning the creature’s black fur and causing it to give off a foul stench.

“There was a mage in the village? Shit...”

The absurd-sounding hypothetical from earlier had turned out to be reality. A single elderly mage had fought to protect the village—and one of the monsters had eaten them.

The monster had then incorporated the magic formulas that had been etched

into the brain of the elderly mage, allowing it to cast magic.

“Take this—*Railgun!*”

Zelos compressed together stones and dust from around the area to form bullets with impressive piercing power and sent them flying toward the monster one after another.

Of course, he made sure not to hit the dwarves with any of his shots. The monster’s magical barrier was only made to take attacks head-on; effectively, it just served as a flat shield. But Zelos’s Railgun spell worked as a powerful electromagnetic gun, and the only way of protecting against it would be to deploy a *cone-shaped* barrier in front of yourself to divert the attack. With the spell formula the monster possessed, taking the attack head-on was the only option—and the barrier would have neither the thickness nor the mana density for that, leaving the monster unable to defend itself.

In reality, despite its impressive name, the Railgun spell prioritized speed, so its power was weaker. If a high-level caster used it, they could easily compensate for that and *make* it powerful; but then, given the spell’s considerable piercing properties, there was the risk of hitting your own allies with it by accident if you weren’t careful.

The spell blasted through the creature’s magical barrier, destroying the barrier and riddling the creature’s body with holes.

Those wounds, however, began to regenerate in no time, the holes closing up in barely the blink of an eye.

“That’s some impressive regeneration. Far stronger than the other two I fought before...”

Even so, the monster’s barrier had been destroyed, and the dwarves, feeling it was their time to shine, blasted it with magic of their own.

“Hi-yaaaaaaaaah!”

Nagri, for his part, rushed in, hammer in hand, and swung it up to pulverize the beast’s head from directly below. The attack shattered the creature’s jaw and sent flesh scattering around the area. The creature’s *face*, though, was on its *abdomen*.

Letting his momentum carry him, Nagri spun straight around from his first attack and bashed his iron hammer into that face. Then Zelos charged in, slashing at the creature with both swords. One of the creature's insect legs was chopped off, falling to the ground.

Sensing it was at a disadvantage, the creature formed a sigil centered around itself.

"This is... Shit! Nagri! Take cover!"

"Wha— Right!"

The instant the two of them set off running, countless rocky spines sprang out from the ground around the monster and surged toward Zelos and Nagri.

"That was close... Does the thing really have area magic?"

"The mage who got eaten must have been fairly talented. It's making this thing a pain to deal with!"

The monster continued its charge and pounced on some of the other dwarves. The dwarves were hiding behind the bridge-building materials, and sometimes using either magic or their weapons to get in some attacks and chip away at the monster's body when they could. But the fearsome rate of its regeneration rendered their efforts meaningless.

Their barrage of Fireball spells had started a fire in the surrounding area too.

"Damn thing's a tough nut to crack. With how fast it's regenerating, it's hard to even tell if we're pushing it back."

"We'd be fine if we could just stop it from moving somehow... The problem is, it's not just fast—it doesn't seem to feel pain."

"Couldn't you just cut it up into a thousand pieces or something?"

"If I did that, I'd turn this whole area into a vacant plot of land. Still, if I get an opportunity, I can give it a try..."

Given all of the people around, Zelos had just been carefully firing off single-shot spells and projectile spells in line with the situation. But if the battle kept going on like this, things would gradually get worse and worse. He wanted to defeat the creature all at once, then—but there weren't enough places for all

the workers to hide.

For now, at least, it seemed like the monster was putting everything it had into regeneration, leaving it with little in the way of physical capabilities.

Judging from the situation, then, it seemed like the monster's physical capabilities fell while it was focused on regenerating. Whether it was moving or healing, it needed to use up nutrients from within its body all the same—and when it prioritized one of those two faculties, the other would naturally decline. This was a useful discovery...but the beast's enormous body still made it tough to deal with.

The dwarves were resolutely keeping up their assault. They were peppering their foe with wound after wound, refusing to give it the opportunity to counterattack.

In the midst, some were even tying its body up with ropes to try and bind it.

“Is it perhaps trying to heal itself and strengthen its body at the same time? If it *is*, then it should run out of nutrients and end up unable to move before long... Or is that a bit naive of me?”

Zelos had reached that conclusion using his common sense—but he couldn't just assume that common sense in this world would always correspond with his own.

He shook off his naive idea and decided to focus on fighting for now.

There definitely *was* the possibility that the monster's two main capabilities would hold each other back, making it easier for Zelos and the others to triumph. But it was also possible that the thing could suddenly go back to moving at full strength. If that were the case, the thing could in an instant be moving on par with Zelos—and devouring the dwarves.

“So if we're going to beat it, I guess we'd better do it now... But how to stop it from moving...?”

The monster was persistently trying to go for the dwarves. Zelos, meanwhile, was using his magic to hold it back and prevent it from doing so, keeping the thing in check as best he could.

“Raaagh!”

Boling cut off one of the monster’s legs with his axe.

GRUOOOOOOH!

“Gwakh!”

With a roar, the monster swung one of its arms and sent Boling flying with a powerful hit.

He was slammed violently against a pile of building materials.

“Boling?!”

“Uncle!”

Boling wasn’t moving. The monster advanced, ready to devour him.

“I won’t let you have him! Fireball!”

A group of dwarves followed up: *“Fireball!”*

Peppered by the dwarves’ flurry of attacks, the monster was unable to advance, and looked as if it was about to retreat. But then...

FWOOMPH!

The creature spread the wings on its back and soared into the air.

Now, though, the monster had finally moved to a spot without obstacles around it—and Zelos took the opportunity to cast some magic.

“Tornado.”

He started off with an area attack spell.

As its name implied, the spell he used summoned a tornado, which not only prevented the foe from moving but also tore away at them with vacuum blades as they were trapped inside. The countless cuts within the whirlwind’s vacuum dissected the monster into tiny pieces of meat.

But Zelos wasn’t done yet.

“Prominence Flame!”



With the fireball from Zelos's stand-alone incineration spell Prominence Flame added to the mix, the Tornado turned into a blazing-hot Firestorm. The simultaneous activation of the two spells combined them into a new area magic attack.

The whirlpool of flames, halfway to becoming plasma, generated an incredible heat that burned what remained of the creature, carbonizing it in a flash.

Leaping into the air had been its final, fatal mistake. With all of its body tissue burned, it was unable to regenerate any longer—and when the carbonized remains of its body fell to the ground, they shattered pathetically into dust.

“Uncle! You okay?!”

“Boling! Are you alive?!”

“Ugh... My whole body hurts... I'd be dead if I hadn't blocked that with my axe...”

In the spur of the moment, Boling had used his axe as a shield to stop the creature from landing a fatal blow on him, allowing him to get away with just a heavy impact.

It was still *enough* of an impact that he'd have been dead on the spot, if he'd been human. But dwarves were a sturdy sort.

“Don't make me worry like that! You're getting on in years! Don't push yourself!”

“Bah. I'm not gonna let you youngsters beat me just yet!”

“By 'Uncle,' do you mean... Boling, Nagri, are the two of you actually related?”

“Oh. Didn't I tell you? He's my pa's younger brother.”

“I can never tell how old you dwarves are. You all look about the same to me...”

There was no way a human could tell. Apparently, Nagri's family had been in the construction business for generations; his father was the head of Hamber Construction. That father, however, had a rather hands-on approach to

management himself, and was always moving from site to site and getting fixated on projects. It was an eternal mystery who actually got all the paperwork done.

“Really, though, look what a mess it made of the place! Well, least the bridge’s fine, so I reckon we’ll manage.”

“There’s still the fire, you know. It’ll burn up our building materials if we don’t put it out. Though most of the materials are stone, at least, so it’s only a *small* fire.”

The dwarves formed a bucket relay to deal with the aftermath of the fight. It seemed like they were capable of acting as specialists in just about any situation. They were impressively flexible.

As Zelos got closer to the monster’s meager remains, he began to use Appraisal on them. But the answer that came into his mind was only a single word: “Charcoal.”

On closer inspection, however, he found one thing that he *was* able to appraise. A dull black stone.

*

Dark God Stone

Originally part of the Dark God’s body. Being separated from the rest of the body has turned it to stone.

By providing the stone with mana, the wielder can gain incredible power, though at the cost of transforming into a monster.

Once transformed, the user is unable to turn back, and will be tormented by an abnormal sense of hunger.

Those who transform into monsters this way will lose their sense of reason and exist simply to prey on other creatures.

*

“So *this* is why... Still, it just looks like a regular old stone.”

The Dark God was the final boss of *Swords & Sorceries*—and the reason that Zelos had ended up in this world. The four goddesses of this world had sealed it away in another world—cyberspace—and their plan of having gamers destroy it for them had left Zelos, Iris, and more as victims.

By and large, this irresponsible plan of theirs had succeeded. But it had released a curse that had run through the network, killing any affected and ultimately leading to their reincarnation in this world.

As Zelos picked up the stone, it suddenly began to shine suspiciously.

“This is...”

Almost as if it was reacting to something, the Dark God Stone was emitting a red glow.

If this Dark God Stone is a fragment of the Dark God’s body, then it must be reacting to something I have on me. But do I really have anything like that?

Zelos started flicking through the list of items in his inventory, checking to see what he had on him. He came across a few suspicious candidates—things like the Dark God’s carapace, or its claws. But it didn’t seem to be any of those, leaving him stumped.

Just what could it be reacting to— Oh. This?

Finding that the last item on the list seemed to fit the bill, Zelos took it out of his inventory.

*

Dark God Soul

Details unknown...

*

It seemed like the glowing red stone was reacting to this “Dark God Soul”

item.

From the name, I guess it's something like the spirit of the Dark God... What should I do with it, though?

For some reason, the stone didn't seem to be showing any reaction to the *other* parts of the Dark God in Zelos's inventory; only this one. It was a little confusing.

But one thing was clear: Zelos had his hands on something troublesome.

"Well, I'll probably be able to use it for something or other. I'll just keep it in storage for now."

Normally, the reaction would've been to try and seal it away...but Zelos was irresponsible with this kind of thing.

He put both the Dark God Stone and the Dark God Soul into his library, then joined the effort to fix up the damage to the worksite.

He'd opted to prioritize the issue at hand over any potential long-term threats.

*

Three days later, a squad of knights was traveling along the highway.

Their goal was to inspect the progress of the highway's construction. There were two knights at the front, with another five or so guarding the rear. In the middle of them was the carriage carrying the duke of the territory, Delthasis.

Looking awfully sharp in his suit, he was sorting through papers inside the carriage, putting everything together for his next job.

Delthasis was probably the busiest man in the entire country. Not only did he have his work as duke, but he also organized the management of the private company he ran, and his private life saw him spend time with his two wives while also making frequent visits to his countless mistresses.

He was a capable man in all aspects of his life.

The construction of the highway was a request from the state, and once it was done, the management of this general area would be left to Earl

Yokubucano. Delthasis, however, wasn't satisfied with that. For starters, the earl had a low approval rate from the common people—which largely came down to the excessive taxes he levied, and his attitude toward commoners as a noble. Above all, though, he was the sort of scumbag who'd do things like claiming the "right of the lord" as an excuse to lay his hands on women who were set to get married.

He was also a major financial contributor to the Wiesler faction, for which he had become a precious source of funding.

Delthasis felt an urge to destroy the man in some way or another; but for now, he didn't have anything that'd let him deal the decisive blow.

"We've almost arrived, Your Grace."

"Mm. Right on time."

Delthasis glanced at his pocket watch and confirmed that he'd arrived at the exact time he'd intended to. As always, he was impressed by the skill of his retainers.

"I don't see any sign of the workers from Hamber Construction."

"I heard they were building a bridge up beyond this point. Something about it being a request from the state?"

"Hmm? No. That can't be right. Building the *highway* was decided on as a state project, but there was no bridge in those plans."

"It *does* sound strange, doesn't it? But when I was talking to Mr. Nagri, I'm sure he told me it was a request from the state..."

Public infrastructure projects decided on by the state were given as requests to whoever ruled the land in question; it was that ruler who would then commission any builders or engineers. And the written request Delthasis had received from the state had mentioned nothing about a bridge.

In the talks about highway construction, there *had* been mention of building a bridge—but that was to be at some *later* point, after making an estimate of the costs. It didn't make sense that construction had already started.

Delthasis went through a number of options in his head. And ultimately, the

one that seemed most likely to him was...

“I take it Earl Yokubucano’s gone ahead and done this himself. A fool’s errand.”

Delthasis had good reason for reaching this conclusion. If a noble wanted to forge ahead with a construction project like this of their own volition, they were still obliged to first report it to the state—in other words, to the king. After all, if the highway was being built as part of a state project, suddenly tacking a bridge onto the plans at the last minute would only cause unnecessary chaos.

If builders were hired, sent out to the location, and arrived only to find that there was already a bridge there, the budget would have been set aside for nothing, and both the materials and the builders’ time would go to waste. Plus, if the bridge *was* being built, it’d be necessary to inform the Duke of Solistia, who controlled the territory on the other side of the river. But no such notice had come.

Delthasis was aware that Yokubucano hated him for personal reasons—but if that alone were enough for the latter to shirk his responsibilities as a noble, it would raise questions about his character, and potentially lead to the fall of his entire house.

For Delthasis, that would be entirely welcome. He’d be more than happy to see such a nuisance of a noble disappear.

Still, while Delthasis didn’t like the current earl, he saw eye to eye with the man’s younger brother. So perhaps he wanted to avoid *completely* crushing the house after all.

“I think I might put in a good word for the man with His Majesty.”

A plan was forming in Delthasis’s mind—a plan to eliminate a certain nuisance.

In the short time that it took to travel the rest of the way to the construction site, Delthasis made full use of his gray matter. On arriving, Delthasis exited the carriage...and saw a bizarre group before him.

The bridge was completed—and the dwarven builders were *dancing* on top of it. For some reason, the center of their formation was a certain mage the duke

recognized, giving his all to a hardcore, cool, *sexy* dance. It was a perfectly coordinated dance; it was *art*. The dwarves were somehow looking awfully cool too, despite their beer-barrel physiques.

The duke's party simply stood there for a while, their jaws agape.

It seemed like Zelos had been well and truly influenced by the dwarves over these last few days. He was a real entertainer now. That day, everyone who'd been involved in the building project seemed to truly be shining...at something entirely unrelated to their jobs.

*

"Building the bridge wasn't meant to be part of it?! What'd'ya mean?!"

The dwarves had been engrossed in a dance of celebration—celebration at completing the bridge, as well as for everybody's brave deeds in combat. But hearing what Delthasis had to say threw the site into chaos. They'd finished the bridge on the order of the state, or so they had thought—but apparently, the state hadn't even decided whether it *wanted* to build the bridge yet.

As you'd expect, this came as quite the shock to them.

"The state's request was only to build the *highway*. There was nothing in there about a bridge. But you're certain you received a written request with His Majesty's seal?"

"Aye. The king's seal's a point of honor among us tradesmen, after all. We've got the papers stored, if you're interested?"

"If you've got them here with you, I'd very much like to take a look, if you wouldn't mind. I wouldn't be surprised if I were questioned about this bridge now, you see."

"Sure thing. Every contractor here should've gotten them, I'm pretty sure."

The dwarves, and the other construction companies, took pride in their work. Jobs for the rich and powerful—nobles and royals, in particular—were often very difficult, so they were honored to be chosen to take on that sort of work.

To them, the contracts they received after winning the tender process were akin to medals.

Since times long ago, builders here had been in the habit of boasting about these sorts of jobs when they went out drinking with their buddies, and so they often kept hold of the papers to prove them. Even leaving that aside, these papers were important documents; keeping them around was essential for management purposes. But regardless, dwarves saw these sorts of documents in a very different way than humans.

Out came the contracts, then, all pressed with the king's seal. Each of the construction agencies here had them on hand. They'd probably all been planning to use them to help them boast over drinks later on.

Delthasis looked through the details, his face grim. He paused, chose his words carefully, and then:

"These are forged. The paper's of poor quality, and the seal's wrong."

"Does that mean...we've been working for free?"

"No. You've built an excellent bridge. Leave the rest to me."

"We appreciate it. We've got our lives riding on this, after all."

So it wasn't as if they were doing this job entirely as a hobby, huh? I guess they were properly thinking about supporting themselves...

Over on the sidelines, Zelos was thinking something kind of rude. But it wasn't as if the dwarves *entirely* conflated their work and their hobbies; at the end of the day, they *did* still think about keeping themselves afloat financially. They just enjoyed the jobs that allowed them to do so, that was all.

"The retainer who brought you these papers... Which house did they belong to?"

"It was someone working for that prick of an earl from the other side of the river. We can go smack him right now, if you want?"

"I'd prefer you didn't. I'll do something about him myself. I'd appreciate it if you could give me some time, though."

"All right. We're always in your debt. If it helps you out, we'll hold off on getting our revenge."

"I appreciate it. Well now, I have a rather urgent duty to get back to... I'll be

taking my leave.”

He’d only just arrived, but Delthasis was already setting out again, returning to the city of Santor.

“Busy as always, I swear. You should try and stop getting yourself *too* many new ladies...”

“I have to go and visit one of them the moment I’m back. I believe I’ll be able to finish my work in the carriage, but I *will* be cutting it close, I expect. Well, as long as it doesn’t leave her in a foul mood...”

“So you really *are* off to see one of your women, then? Never learn, do you? One of them’s going to off you someday.”

“It’s my way of life. I can’t let a lady cry.”

Having said those words with no shame, his face as stoic as ever, he hopped into the carriage and set off without delay.

Most likely, he’d spend the whole trip back devising a plan to take down Earl Yokubucano.

A capable man wasted no time.

“When does he ever find the time to rest?”

“Not a clue. He’s always busy—with all sorts of things...”

Zelos’s cigarette smoke was carried away by the wind.

The workers watched Delthasis’s carriage disappear into the distance—just moments after it had arrived—before getting ready to take down their campsite.

They’d safely made it through this job, and tomorrow, they’d be off to work up a sweat at another intense worksite somewhere else.

Hamber Construction was fighting a never-ending battle.

As a side note, they would also be looking after the villagers who’d fled. You could chalk it up to a strong sense of duty and empathy being a common trait among these crafters—but perhaps they just wanted more crafters to join their ranks, and people to be in charge of cooking them some meals.

The story of the mysterious creatures and their attack would be conveyed to Delthasis in a report by Hamber Construction. Zelos, after all, was only a part-timer.

*

A few days later, Zelos and the others arrived back in Santor.

Hamber Construction was based in a part of town that was commonly known as an industrial district.

All sorts of crafters had workshops lined up there side by side, each separated into their own specialties and full of the sights and sounds of hard work. But you'd sometimes have a situation where, say, two blacksmiths with workshops right next to each other got into heated arguments.

It was in this area that Hamber Construction had its combined workshop and office—and that was where the carriages pulled up.

As the throng of crafters got off the carriages, they headed together to taverns to get some food.

“Hey, Zelos. While you're here, you want to join us for a meal? At my uncle's house.”

“Is that okay with you, Boling?”

“Fine by me. The more, the merrier, I say.”

Zelos followed Nagri and Boling to a simple brick house.

As he went through the door, he saw a wide range of tools hanging up on the walls. The room was almost more like something you'd find in a workshop than a house.

“You know, Boling, I'm having a hard time telling what you actually specialize in...”

“He does everything! From smithing to delicate handiwork.”

“Give me a minute. I'll whip up me best snack.”

“Those mekkala beans again? You sure love those, don't you, Uncle?”

“They're the soul food of us dwarves! You can eat them as many times as you

want; you'll never get sick of them."

Boling headed farther inside and started preparing to cook. However...

"Crap! So they *did* go moldy. And here I was, going to make you me special mekkala beans..."

The old dwarf was swearing at the pot in his hands. It was filled with soybeans soaking in water—and the beans were covered with an impressive amount of white mold.

Had he really been planning to feed his guests the same beans he'd started soaking before heading out to build the bridge?

"Mold, you say?"

"Aye. The sort that grows on barley and soybeans. The stuff grows stupid fast."

"You gotta be more careful with storing your food, or it'll grow in no time. Come on, Uncle—meat's fine, isn't it?"

Nagri had already started drinking lukewarm ale.

Zelos, meanwhile, took a casual glance into Boling's pot. And then, as he did...his Appraisal activated.

*

Koji

A type of mold. Begins to multiply ferociously starting at humidity levels of 40 percent.

A bacteria that grows with ease, especially on barley, soybeans, rice, and other such grains.

Stronger than lactic acid bacteria and acetic acid bacteria. This particular koji is a mutant variety that only grows in lands with high amounts of mana.

Its growth rate is impressive enough that it can even crowd out black mold.

*

“I’ve found it! YES!”

“What?!”

“What’s the matter, lad?!”

Koji in this world was robust. Perhaps because of the local climate, it seemed to grow more easily than other bacteria, and it was easy to store. The thought that he’d be able to use it as a fermentation starter had Zelos madly dancing for joy. It seemed like the proverb really was true: slow and steady wins the race.

“With this, I’ll finally be able to start working on making sake.”

“Huh? With this mold here?”

“Seems a bit hard to believe, but... Well, if you do manage to make something with it, give me a taste, eh, lad?”

Right when he’d been about to go out and look for koji, Zelos had been dragged along to help out with building the bridge. It had left him a little depressed—but now, all of a sudden, he was overflowing with motivation again. That said, he was forgetting something: the fact that his rice still hadn’t grown yet...

That night, Zelos, Nagri, and Boling had a grand bout of drinking—mostly to celebrate the fact that they’d successfully built the bridge and made it back home safely to Santor, but also with a bit of excitement about the koji sprinkled in.

When Zelos returned to his own home the next morning, he saw his entire field covered with weeds. The sight left him amazed. It seemed like it wasn’t just the koji that grew quickly.

That very same day, he took a sickle in hand and resolved to devote the next few days to clearing out all of the weeds from his field.

Chapter 8: The Old Guy Donates to Charity

Three men returned to the abandoned house they were using as a hideout and started preparing for the trip back to their own country.

Their country had been planning to use the Dark God Stones to strengthen their military—but now the men had discovered that the stones were *dangerous*. They needed to send a warning, and quick.

They'd tested out the stones on four mercenaries, and all of them had been transformed into monstrosities. Bizarre, twisted life-forms, existing only to consume other living beings.

Not only would these items fail to strengthen their military—but they could very well bring their entire country to ruin.

Just as the men were preparing to leave, a single mage, hood pulled low over his eyes, arrived at the hideout.

The men started to draw their swords, but stopped when they recognized the visitor.

"Oh? What's happened? Seems like you're in a real hurry... Were you spotted?"

"No. I don't think so, at least. But we found something we gotta report back to the state as quick as we can."

"Oh? And what would that be? Surely you wouldn't have to keep it a secret from a researcher like me."

The black-clad mage flashed an unnatural smile at the men.

"It's those stones. They turn people into *monsters*... We thought they might be dangerous, but it's so much worse than we were expecting."

As the mage listened, his mouth could be seen twisting into the slightest of grins under his hood. But the other men didn't notice.

"Hmm? Well, *that's* unexpected. Still, though... *Monsters*, you say..."

“N-No! We can’t use them! You’ve gotta stop your research!”

“From what you’ve said, grinding them into powder and administering it in small doses might be a promising option...”

“You’re *still* planning to use the damn things?!”

“Of course I am! In fact, let me ask—do you really think a small country like your own stands a chance of beating any other country *without* using them?”

The men’s country was in poverty. It had nothing in the way of notable trade or industry, let alone any local specialties.

If they wanted to survive, their only option would be to try and take control of other countries, like they’d done through wars of aggression years in the past.

But even then, using the Dark God Stones was just far too risky.

“There’s no need to have your *army* use them, though. All you have to do is pass them to some shady organization, and get it to distribute them to whatever other country you want to take down.”

“What?!”

“If we release something like that into the world, it’s gonna come back to bite us!”

“Are you *insane*?!”

“All I’m saying is, you can use them to drum up chaos among your enemies. Let them bring *themselves* to ruin.”

Intentionally spreading something so dangerous around seemed like a completely mad idea. But if the men’s country didn’t break out of the deadlock it was in, it’d eventually disappear one way or the other anyway.

“Using the underworld to weaken your enemy’s a proper strategy too, isn’t it? Not that it’s a particularly *honorable* one, of course.”

“Why would we want to help a bunch of criminal scum get rich?! And even if they *did* pull it off, I can’t imagine we’d be able to stop the damn things from spreading among *our* people.”

“You’ll just have to do what you can about that. Think of it as an opportunity

to cull some of the undesirables in society. Still, I'll do my best to improve it on my end and make it easier to use."

"I just...don't think it's going to work out that smoothly."

"The sort of money-obsessed lowlifes we're talking about don't think anything of other people's lives. I wouldn't be surprised if they did even more for us than we needed them to."

The men didn't have any other choice left. If they didn't deal a decisive blow, somehow, their country was on a one-way road to collapse.

"Fine. We'll do it. But we'll still have to inform the crown first. We can't just make a decision like this on our own."

"I suppose you're right. I'll do my best to make the effect a little weaker; you guys should find someone from the underworld to work with."

With that, the mage left the hideout.

"As shady as ever, he is."

"Yeah. Still, can't deny he's helped our country out—at least a bit. As much as I *want* to deny it..."

"He's sharp, but I can't trust him. He gives me the heebie-jeebies."

These men were spies who skulked around behind the scenes of society, but even *they* didn't trust this black-clad mage. There was no telling what he had planned, and he didn't seem interested in talking about his ambitions either. So for now, they'd just have to keep a careful eye on him.

His knowledge was worth too much to *not* make use of him.

The men split up, two of them leaving the third alone with the task of reporting back to their country. All of them were carrying the fate of their country on their shoulders—there was no time to waste.

*

"I weed and I weed, and yet alas, mine days grow no easier... I can do naught but stare at my hands."

Zelos, looking every bit the farmer as he mowed his field, was getting

understandably fed up with it.

Ultimately, he'd been away for about two weeks helping to build the bridge, and by the time he'd gotten back, a thick layer of grass had grown to cover his field.

He'd just barely managed to distinguish the crops from the weeds and gotten to work on pulling out the latter. But pulling out all of the weeds was taking him quite a while. For what it was worth, he *had* used the same Gaia Control magic he'd used for building, but the little bits all had to be done by hand no matter what. And every day, new, *different* weeds would spring up, so there was no end to the work.

Using an all-purpose sickle with a triangular point, Zelos was painstakingly culling all the weeds. But there'd already be more little buds sprouting again by the next morning, and in just three days' time those weeds would reach a considerable height.

Even if he tried to mulch the weeds and turn them into fertilizer, new weeds would just grow before the fertilizer was ready.

Zelos didn't even know where their seeds and roots were. But what he did know was this: if he took his eyes off them for a second, they'd turn the whole field into grassland. The weeds grew so fast that it seemed his field would turn into a virgin forest if he left it for a month.

"What's up with every plant in this world being so tough? I swear..."

Zelos liked farmwork, but the rate at which new weeds kept popping up was causing even *him* to get fed up with it.

It was far beyond what a single person could be reasonably expected to deal with.

He looked in the direction of his home as he puffed on a cigarette—and as he did, he saw an old man and a number of knights coming into view.

It was Creston, escorted by the group of knights.

"Oh, if it isn't Creston! It's been a while. How have you been?"

"Yes, a while indeed! I've come with a delivery for you—and simply to see

how you've been getting on, my good chap."

"A delivery? What could *that* be?"

"A report addressed to you from my grandson Croesus. Regarding the ring you made for him a while ago as a magic conduit."

"Ahhh. That's right; I *did* do that, didn't I?"

By this point, Zelos had completely forgotten about it. He'd made a bracelet and a couple of rings, but only as experiments. Figuring he wouldn't use them anyway, he'd given the bracelet to Celestina and the rings to Zweit and Croesus, asking them if they could test out how the items felt to use and write him reports while they were at it.

He hadn't had particularly high hopes; honestly, he was surprised that one of them had actually sent him a report.

"Do you mind if I read it now?"

"That's perfectly fine by me. Still, the fact that there's no letter from him about how he has actually *been* of late is so very much like him. He didn't send anything *but* the report, the darn lad."

"So he's a researcher right to the core, eh? Well, well, let's take a look..."

The report contained Croesus's detailed findings about the conduit: the efficiency of his magic while using it, for starters, as well as details on his own mana consumption. Extrapolating from this data, he went on to describe everything from the burden incurred while using the conduit to how much it increased the power of his magic, all crammed onto the paper in tiny letters.

The report ended with, *I quite like it. I plan to make good use of it going forward.*

It looked like Zelos's prototype had been well received.

"Mmm... Seems he liked it, one way or the other. Which makes me happy, as the one who made the thing."

"Perhaps I should ask you to make one for me as well? I may well end up needing it before long, you see..."

“Are you going out to a battle or something?”

“No, no... Just to exterminate a pest or two. The sort of filthy pest that gets drawn to a beautiful flower... Heh heh.”

Creston had positioned spies, trained from an early age, all over the place. Some of those under his command had special capabilities for gathering detailed information, and they allowed him to stay informed even about things happening far away from him—including at, say, the Istol Academy of Magic. Of course, the information he received included updates on his beloved granddaughter. And on any students at the academy who might begin to harbor feelings for her...

A certain student in an auditorium at the Istol Academy of Magic suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

Zelos, too, felt unsettled by Creston’s words...but he specifically pretended not to have heard them. Whatever the old man was talking about, he figured he didn’t want to get involved in it.

The knights with Creston were no less disturbed. They had a hard job.

“If that’s all you need, it should be easy to do. You didn’t need to come all the way here in person just for that, though, did you? Surely you could’ve sent a message if you were just asking for something like that.”

“I have some other business too.”

“Other business? What would that be?”

“You taught Celestina a method for deciphering the magic characters, yes? Well, I’d rather like to make use of that method.”

Zelos had only taught the method for deciphering magic characters to Celestina and Zweit.

But going by the flow of the conversation, it seemed like Creston might be wanting to pass that same knowledge down to his own retainers.

“Are you saying you want me to teach someone again?”

“No—I myself have learned to read the letters now, albeit only the basics. It seems Tina is quite the teacher herself!”

Creston was grinning broadly, his nature as a doting grandfather on full display. But if Creston already knew how the deciphering worked, Zelos couldn't understand why the man was looking for *his* approval.

"Um... Is that really the kind of thing that you need to come and ask my permission for?"

"Of *course* it is! Why, you're the one and only Great Sage in the entire world. I could hardly spread that sort of knowledge without checking with you first, now, could I?"

"Is that really how it is? If you were talking about the magic formulas I use, it'd be one thing, but I don't mind if it's just the regular magic formulas. Feel free to pass on what you know about deciphering them; do whatever you want to do with the knowledge."

"Ooh! Is that truly all right with you?"

"As long as you don't use them for anything bad, that is. Information's inevitably going to leak out to someone, sooner or later; it's not the sort of thing you can just keep secret. For example, if a man drives his wife to suicide, he can try to keep it a secret all he wants, but information about what happened is going to spread from the wife's friends, family, colleagues... Eventually, everyone who knew them will find out what happened. Unless you've got some way of putting locks on people's mouths, the method for deciphering magic formulas is going to spread throughout society sooner or later."

"That seems like an...awfully *specific* scenario, no?"

"It's just an example. Though, well, it *is* the sort of gossip you hear around a lot."

Given enough time, confidential information would eventually come to light. That was just how things worked. Unimportant information tended to spread in an instant, but it was transient, passing out of awareness before long. Meanwhile, things that tickled people's sense of morality—for one reason or another—seemed to endlessly recirculate throughout society.

And that was doubly true for information like a method for deciphering magic

characters—information that would mean so much for modern society in this world that people would stop at nothing to get their hands on it. Of course, that included sending spies—and even if you tried to take measures against that, it was easy to imagine that sort of information eventually leaking out somehow, somewhere, sometime.

“I suppose you may be right; even state secrets tend to wind up in the hands of opposing nations before long. But do you really not mind other people knowing about your method for deciphering the magic characters?”

“Again, if this were about *my* magic formulas, it’d be dangerous. But if we’re talking about the older type, for which you can’t compress the formulas all that well, I don’t really see any issue with it... Besides, deciphering them isn’t something I came up with myself. It’s been around for a long, long time. Just forgotten.”

“I really don’t understand your special formulas. I had Tina write one as best she could from memory and show it to me, but I could scarcely even *begin* to comprehend what was what.”

“You’re better off not knowing. It’s still too early—though someone will probably figure them out eventually. Anyway, even if you say it was only bits and pieces...did Celestina really manage to memorize *that*?”

“Brilliant, isn’t she? Still, did you really have to leave her with a knot like that to untie...?”

“It’s more just that teaching it myself would be a pain. I don’t think anyone would be able to understand it anyway, and even if they could, it’d probably be hundreds of years from now.”

Trying to compress magic formulas based on the fifty-six magic characters involved some major hurdles. It wasn’t as if it were *impossible* by any means, but the portions relating to the power of the magic itself, as well as to the application of mana, would still require you to write out enormous strings of magic characters.

It was hard to express particular phenomena and reactions with words, and yet sometimes you’d *have* to try and do just that. That was how the magic formulas from ancient times worked, at least.

With the newer, binary form of magic, you could represent all that with strings of zeros and ones; the problem was that there was very likely nobody in this world who'd be capable of understanding it. Though perhaps that was less of a 'problem' and more of a blessing.

Even if someone *did* manage to understand it, incorporating a method like that into this world, and creating spells with it, would require a lot of work. In other words, even someone who understood those formulas wouldn't be able to do anything with them unless they had a considerable amount of time and labor at their disposal.

Zelos, for his part, had overcome that problem by facing it with a number of like-minded individuals, essentially just throwing waves of people at the issue. But having now used his wide-area annihilation magic three or so times here—specifically, Dark Judgment, Purgatory Blaze: Charred Annihilation, and Zephyrus's Harsh Approach—he'd come to learn just how dangerous it was. So he didn't particularly want to see that sort of magic spreading throughout society.

"There's one *more* matter about which I would like to speak with you, but... Well, I am reluctant to get into it here."

"Ah, sorry about that. Let's go inside. I'll get you a nice cold drink."

"Oh? A cold drink, you say?"

"I can't offer too much in the way of hospitality, but, well...we probably *should* head inside, if we're going to be talking. Especially if there are any topics you don't want to risk people overhearing."

"Indeed. Though, well—this matter I've mentioned is merely a question of money."

Zelos invited both Creston and the knights inside his home.

It was far roomier than you'd expect from its log cabin appearance, with seven or so empty rooms inside.

The main rooms Zelos was actually using were the first floor's workshop space, kitchen, and living room.

He *had* the extra rooms, but didn't really have any use for them. He was thinking of leaving two or three rooms spare in case he got a wife and children in the future, but that still left four rooms empty, at the very least.

His basement, at least, was being used as a storage room; that was where he kept his dryer, his farming equipment, and so on. Though he was a little sad that the dryer still hadn't had its chance to shine yet—he continued to wait on his rice.

“Give me a moment, please. I'll fetch you something to drink.”

Zelos headed to the kitchen, grabbed a bunch of cups, and poured everyone cold beer from a tap he'd made himself. It was a somewhat dark-colored ale, with a white head on top and a fruity scent. He'd found this ale by asking the dwarves for information, trying to find something as close to a lager as he could.

It made for a great drink during a break in the middle of farmwork. He had mead too, but that was a more expensive alcohol, so he kept it chilling in the refrigerator.

In this world, your main alcohol option outside of those two was wine; there was very little made from grains, like sake or shochu. What did exist of those sorts were made by dwarves, who had a real fondness for alcohol, but they still weren't all that popular.

Aside from that, this world had crops like potatoes as well. You could use them to make alcohol by boiling them, putting them in your mouth to mix with your saliva, then spitting them back out and leaving the mixture to ferment.

Indigenous people from certain areas made alcohol in that way, but actually seeing the stuff made was enough to make you lose your interest in drinking it. Here, it was mostly the dwarves living in mountainous areas that made those sorts of drinks.

Elves, meanwhile, tended to prefer either wine, mead, or fruit liqueur. They were surprisingly heavy drinkers, being in the habit of enjoying a small drink here and there during breaks in their farmwork or other work.

Both dwarves and elves alike seemed very fond of work, alcohol, and making

merry.

“Day drinking, eh? I suppose just a taste would be all right... Oh? It’s chilled?”

“Warm ale grosses me out, so I chill it like this to make it more refreshing. It’s better than you might expect as a drink on a hot day!”

“Mm... This is a first for me. How intriguing.”

“I’ve got some for each of you knights too. Please do give it a try.”

It was Creston’s first time drinking cold ale too. For starters, while this world *did* have magic, it wasn’t very technologically advanced. Magic was really just seen as something for attacking and defending; nobody had really thought of using it for everyday conveniences. The knights exchanged glances, perplexed.

“Is it...really okay?”

“We *are* on duty. Isn’t this a problem?”

“We’re being treated as guests, though. It might seem rude to refuse his offer...”

The knights were loyal to their duty. They might’ve enjoyed the occasional drink when they were on break, but they never drank while they were at work.

That was what had them so perplexed.

“You have my permission. It’d be rude to refuse the man here—and it’s a chance to enjoy a precious experience too.”

“A-All right, then. We’ll take you up on your offer. Thank you.”

“*Oh*. It really *is* cold.”

“Cold ale, huh? Never had this before...”

Creston and his knights each took a sip of the cold ale.

And all at once, their faces turned to a look of surprise.

The drink was carbonated; it had a sweet, fruity taste; and moreover, it was *chilled*, causing an entirely new, refreshing sensation to spread throughout their bodies. And it went down so smoothly too.

“This is great! You’ve just cooled it down, but somehow...”

“Now that I’ve had this, I won’t be able to drink the ale I usually have anymore!”

“Yeah—I feel like the usual warm ale will just taste cloyingly sweet if I have it again now.”

“What a splendid drink! I’ve always thought ale was just a cheap swill of a drink; I’d never have imagined you could make it taste like *this* just by chilling it. Such a delightfully refreshing sensation! Did you chill it with some sort of magic tool? If so, you’ve made me rather interested in owning one myself...”

“I did—and the mechanism behind it’s pretty simple, actually. It’s the same thing as chilling food and the like to stop it from spoiling so quickly. It’s something anyone can do.”

Magic and magic tools were seen exclusively as weapons for offense or self-defense; nobody had really thought to use magic in this kind of way before. But now Creston and the knights had had their worldview shattered—giving them their first glimpse at a *new* world.

“Certainly, the mechanism itself may be simple. But why is it that nobody else has thought of it before, then...?”

“Isn’t it because magic is seen around these parts as just a tool for fighting? Depending on what you do with it, it can be useful in your everyday life, but if everyone started with the assumption that it’s only good for fighting, then maybe nobody just thought of researching this kind of use for it before?”

“Researching magic for improving people’s lives, eh? Hmm. Or... Wait! Magic *tools*! Why, this is *quite* a good idea...”

Even the mage faction that Creston himself had been central in creating had been made with war in mind; that was what had driven the faction’s efforts to improve relations with the Order of Knights. But add research into the kind of magic that would improve people’s lives... That held the potential for immense gains—which could allow the faction to overtake the others in no time at all. Even if the design of the refrigerator itself was simple, popularizing it far and wide would bring significant profits. At the same time, it could also draw in mages who were dissatisfied with the current state of the factions and potentially speed up research into magical techniques as well.

“How are you cooling it, though? Ice would simply melt, I presume...”

“You put a tank for storing water inside a metal box, and you freeze *that* to create cold air that chills the things inside. It only requires enough mana to freeze water, so not all that much; that shouldn’t be a problem. Even a small magic stone should be more than enough.”

“But you would need to be a mage to store mana within the stone, yes? Might that not be a rather tall order for the average citizen?”

“If all you need is a formula for chilling something, it can just be etched into the magic stone itself—so that just leaves supplying the stone with mana, which anyone can do, even if they’re not a mage. It’s not all that difficult, is it?”

You could put your mana into something, even if you weren’t a mage. That was true of all living beings in this world; they were instinctively capable of handling mana from birth. Even wild animals used magic for things like momentarily boosting their physical abilities, so it was hardly as if humans were incapable of doing something like this.

“Certainly. I suppose you’re right. Though there’s still the issue of *how much* mana would be needed, exactly...”

“As long as they’ve got enough mana to use the Ice spell, anyone should be able to make it last a few days. It’ll depend on the size of the refrigerator, though.”

“Allow me to ask, then: what would be the size of the...*refrigerator*, you call it...that you’re using yourself? I’d like to see, for reference.”

“It’s in the kitchen. Follow me; I’ll let you have a look.”

Zelos led Creston to the kitchen and pointed to the fridge he’d haphazardly fitted next to a supporting post.

It was a simple design, with the sides covered by bricks, and just a metal door at the front.

The inside was simple too; there was a tank right at the top for adding water to, then some shelves below that, each storing something different.

On the top shelf, which was most exposed to the cold air, was meat; in the

middle, the beer barrel filled with ale. Down the bottom were vegetables and other such things.

“This is it. Smaller than you’d think, right?”

“Right you are. I suppose there *wouldn’t* be much of an issue, at this size. Hmm... I shall show it to my retainers later.”

“I’m planning to make a bigger one too at some point, but for now, this size seems just about right.”

“A larger one? Ah—so like a storehouse! Certainly, things transported long distances by river can spoil over time. So you mean to prevent that, yes?”

“You *could* put it on a ship, but the ship itself might freeze over if you don’t do something to let it resist the cold in some way.”

“Most intriguing! Whatever the case, though, I must assemble a number of mages to get to work...”

Creston’s faction of mages—the Solistia faction—wasn’t currently involved in any business, apart from the creation of magic scrolls.

The average mage didn’t know all that much; even if you hired them, you could hardly expect them to do something like improving magic formulas.

Mages who’d proved themselves as mercenaries were useful to have by your side in battle, so they were highly sought-after by other mercenaries, making them difficult to entice into any faction. Ultimately, there wasn’t much of an option for supplementing your numbers apart from training up competent mages yourself.

That being the case, it’d be fastest to gather up graduates from the Istol Academy of Magic and create a new, separate organization. But there weren’t all that many mages who were able to cooperate well with the Order of Knights.

Faced with a shortage of both crafters and fighters, Creston was struggling to secure himself the right human resources.

“Do mages tend to end up unemployed if they’re not good at what they do?”

“Well, there are a great many who graduate from the academy only to prove half-baked at combat and crafting alike. Most of those sort try to change

occupations to become alchemists, but medicinal ingredients are expensive—not easy to obtain. Ultimately, they tend to end up as simple laborers.”

“What about making magic tools? It seems like there’d be pretty high demand for those.”

“They sell for quite a sum, but that also means that lower-ranked mercenaries can’t afford them. A mage can craft as many tools as they’d like, but that’s of little use if they don’t sell. When mercenaries get to the middle ranks, *then* they start to use magic tools...but they’re both disposable and expensive, so those mercenaries tend to stop using them before long. At the end of the day, earning a profit is no easy thing for a mage.”

It seemed like it was tough for mages to get by in this world.

“In the future, though, we could begin research into magic tools for improving people’s lives. Which I’m sure will give the average mage quite a bit more to do! Of course, *our* faction will be the first to start on that...”

“So you *are* going to look at researching magic that’s not just a tool for fighting, then? Expanding the scope of what it means to be a mage like that could be just what you need to change the factions.”

It was an opportunity to build up a faction supported by the common populace—to gain enough political influence to sweep aside every other faction all at once.

As part of the ducal house, Creston himself didn’t particularly need more influence. But if his *faction* were able to earn a great amount of authority among mages, it’d have an easier time pursuing reform. The only problem now was the lack of manpower—as things were, Creston just wanted *anyone*, even if they were mages who’d fallen to poverty. He was willing to take whoever he could get.

“Anyway—you want to start selling refrigerators yourself, right? Cheap, low-quality magic stones should be plenty. But just so you’re aware, you’ll also need dwarves to do the metalworking, and workers to install them once they’re done; in other words, it’ll take a lot of management.”

“We were thinking of making an association of mages that we could send out

to anybody requesting one of these devices. Which is another reason for which we've been attempting to bring more people to our side...though I must admit it's not been going particularly well."

"It's probably a matter of wages, isn't it? Everybody wants to live a good life."

"Getting the money for good wages is part of why we were wanting to create these 'refrigerators' to begin with, though... How much do you think they should be worth?"

"Who knows? I can make them for pretty cheap...but in my case, I do everything myself, so I don't know what the right price for anything would be."

"There's no helping it, then. I'll have to consult with Del... He's far more familiar with the prices of things than I am myself."

"By the way, that reminds me—you were saying earlier you wanted to talk to me about something money-related. What was that about?"

"Ah. Well, we have to hand you your share of the proceeds from the magic scroll business. The thing is, it's a tad...exorbitant. Which is why I came to visit you in person."

"Proceeds? Oh—the royalties. Right. When you say 'exorbitant,' though—just what kind of number are you talking about?"

"It's written on this paper here. I'd recommend steeling yourself before you take a look."

Zelos unfurled the sheet of paper Creston gave him—and as he looked at the sum, his pupils turned into saucers.

He'd never seen this many zeros lined up next to each other before. Solistia Trading had been putting vast numbers of its mages to work making scrolls, and selling them all over the place. The mages in charge of producing them were probably going through hell.

"Uh, there are a *lot* of zeros here... All I did was optimize the magic being used at the academy, you know?"

"And this is your payment for that. You must understand the magnitude of what you've done."

“It feels like this would be enough money for me to spend the entire rest of my life just fooling around... Honestly, seeing a number like this is just *scary*.”

The figure written on the paper had made Zelos dizzy.

He’d been planning to do honest work, and get by on a meager sum...but apparently, he’d now stumbled onto a pile of money large enough to let him live the high life until the end of his days. It seemed like the kind of thing that could lead a person down the path to becoming worthless.

“By the way, this sum will likely only continue to grow—you *are* aware of that, no? It simply goes to show how spectacular your creations are.”

“I feel like getting this much money will make me into a worthless lump! How am I even meant to use this much?!”

“Say what you wish, but I *must* ask that you accept it. This is your fair compensation. If you turn it down, poor Del would be charged with a crime.”

“Oh... *Jesus*. This is ridiculous.”

Frankly, if Zelos *wanted* to earn a lot of money, he could just about earn as much as he wanted.

But he only wanted to live a quiet, peaceful life, so he didn’t need all that much. Even if he *had* piles of money, he’d have no way of using it all.

As he tried to think of some way, any way, of putting it to use, he casually glanced out of his window—and saw the roof of the church. Which gave him an idea.

“Would it be okay for me to donate that money to charity?”

“Donate it? To where?”

“To orphanages. I was thinking, what if I use this money to employ the orphans—pay them to do charity work? It’d help to teach them the importance of working, and it’d give them a wage too. I’d be fine just keeping a tenth or so of the money for myself.”

“Wha—?!”

As you might expect, Creston was shocked. What Zelos was suggesting was

essentially a kind of welfare, employing children who might otherwise end up as criminals and helping to put them on the right path in life.

Usually, this was something that the lord of the territory should do...but there was only so much tax money to go around. Delthasis couldn't just take the earnings from his private company and put them right toward welfare either; they had to go to wages and the like. Maybe he *could* do something on that front, but it'd take time. The money Zelos was going to be given, however, was different. It was his own, personal income, so there was nothing to stop him from doing whatever he wanted with it.

"While we're at it, we could use some to give a bit of extra money to elderly people who can't work anymore, if you'd like. I'll leave that part to you."

"Hmm... What do you intend on having the children do, though?"

"Let's see... Perhaps they could split off into different areas and pick up waste to clean up the town? Things like empty bottles could be recycled to make use of the glass again, and anything combustible could be burned to turn it into ash that can fertilize fields. How about that?"

"I see. So you're not simply meaning to hand your money to the orphanages and educate the children with nothing in return."

"I'm sure there'll be some kids who don't like being in an orphanage, so we could get the older ones to hop on a carriage to a nearby farming village and help out with weeding or something. They should be able to earn a decent enough amount through that, right?"

While there *were* orphanages for orphans to go to, there were nonetheless a lot of children around town with no relatives to take care of them. Some had been abandoned by their parents, while others had come here by stowing away on a ship. One way or another, they'd increased in number, especially around the old town area. On rare occasion, the body of a child who'd starved to death would be found in an alleyway, and they'd be buried in a cemetery for people with no relatives. Zelos's suggestion would go a long way toward minimizing that kind of tragedy.

"I'm not saying I'll be able to save every last child. At the end of the day, maybe that means all this talk about helping the orphans makes me a

hypocrite... Still, I think I *do* have to take the money I don't need and put it to use for *something*."

"That's more than enough. No man is a god. We can only do what's within our power."

"Oh—please prioritize weeding my field, if you can. I'm short on hands, and it's been causing me quite the bother."

"So *that's* what you were after...? Well, I suppose I shan't complain. It's a fine deal for me."

And so, Zelos had rather hurriedly decided on how he'd be using his royalties. It was the birth of a new welfare foundation—one that would later come to be known as the Merlin Foundation.

While it was just a bit of charity that he'd started on a whim, it would eventually spread throughout the entire country, with the help of many different nobles and merchants. Though for the time being, nobody was aware that it could all be traced back to a rather strange middle-aged man.

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"Anyway, that's what happened."

"Mm. So he's going to donate it to the children? And he intends to do so by paying them a wage to work... That *does* sound like an interesting project."

Creston had just relayed his earlier discussion with Zelos to his son, Delthasis, the current duke—causing Delthasis to let out a sigh of admiration.

The compensation being paid to Zelos was more than a person could hope to spend by themselves in a single lifetime; that was just how well the magic scrolls were selling. But still, the offer to donate the bulk of his earnings was a truly valiant deed, reinforcing Delthasis's perception of the Great Sage as a being beyond those sorts of desires.

In reality, Zelos desired all sorts of things. But those things were so mundane that nobody saw him as greedy for it.

"Regardless, that *does* sound like a good way of using money. And I applaud his decision to not take any more money for himself than he needs."

“It seems he really *does* just wish to live a quiet life. So much so that he’s focused on being self-sufficient.”

“Still, that...‘refrigerator,’ was it? That *does* interest me. And if it’s easy to make, all the better. All it needs, you said, is a magic stone with some kind of freezing magic formula etched into it, yes? That could prove convenient at taverns, eateries, all sorts of places.”

“What do you say we do about pricing?”

“The larger the device, the larger the magic stone it will require, so the price will probably differ by quite a lot. I think we start by selling small ones and seeing how it goes.”

Delthasis had already started moving to crush the other mage factions. While everyone else was blinded by their lust for political power, he was maneuvering slyly, swiftly, behind the scenes. The magic scroll business had been the first shot from his arsenal. And now, the refrigerators would be his second.

He’d already filed a patent for the device within the day, so anyone else who wanted to make one now would have to get permission from Solistia Trading. If they simply copied the design *without* that permission, they’d inevitably end up in court.

Not to mention, people could hardly stand to make the *duke* their enemy. He had his competition cornered; it was a perfect plan.

“Is he going to be donating part of his proceeds from these refrigerators too?”

“Indeed. Anyway, allow me to ask—how are things proceeding with *that* matter?”

“They’re proceeding very well. Earl Yokubucano will be dismissed before long, I imagine. And with him will go a large part of the Wiesler faction’s funding.”

Not only had the earl forged an order from the king to build a bridge, but he’d also been sending most of the tax money he squeezed from the peasants right through to the Wiesler faction. In other words, he was even committing fraud with the money that was meant to be dedicated to the state. The death penalty seemed inevitable at this point.

While nobles in this country had hereditary succession, their positions weren't that much more stable than the average civil servant.

If they went against the law, they could not only have their court rank stripped from them but also be sentenced to death. This particular earl's younger brother, however, had a high approval rate from the people, so Delthasis was working behind the scenes to try and get the man named the next earl.

"The younger brother's name was... Marcinar, was it? Could we make use of him?"

"He can't use magic. Meaning he's affiliated with the Order of Knights—so I expect he'd be willing to help out with our plan."

"The same as Tina, then... Regardless, he sounds like a promising ally."

"Yes. Especially seeing as he's widely known among the knights, and believes the Wiesler faction's activities to be a threat."

The Wiesler faction had been rather active lately, and its reputation among the broader public was terrible. Outside of the usual criminal acts, its members were causing disturbances in all sorts of ways, including things as pathetic as petty theft and dine-and-dashing.

"Has the Saint-Germain faction said anything?"

"It seems like they're not interested. I imagine they're planning to just sit back and observe for a while. Probably keeping a careful eye on things and trying to decide which side they'd benefit from joining. They should know neutrality is the bane of trust..."

"I suppose we should at least be thankful they're not opposing us... What about the second stage of the plan? When do you imagine that will begin?"

"As soon as next week. We'll get *her* to help us out."

The duke and former duke were deft manipulators. They were reaching out for their prey—silently, steadily, surely. Making sure that by the time that prey noticed, it would be far too late.

"Do you really believe Candy will help us out...?"

“I think you should avoid using that name, Father. If she hears it, she’ll sulk and hole up in her room for *who knows* how long.”

“Why does she use a poisonous plant as her alias, anyway? I must say, I find it to be in rather poor taste...”

“Who knows? It’s a mystery to me too. Anyway—hopefully that wraps things up for today. I’m in a hurry...”

“Which woman is it this time? Just how many times do you have to be stung before you’ll be satisfied, my boy...”

“It’s my way of life. If I’m killed by a lovely lady, I’d have no complaints.”

Creston sighed, and muttered, *Where, oh, where, did I go wrong with raising the boy, I wonder...?*

He cast his mind back, but he couldn’t remember anything he’d done to make his son turn out like this. It seemed Delthasis wasn’t just capable with the ladies; he was capable of making his father cry too.

All Creston could do was pray that his son wasn’t stabbed to death by some woman or another before their plans came to fruition.

Chapter 9: Formal Notice of the Combat Training Camp

The dorms at the Istol Academy of Magic were a place where aspiring young mages came from all different regions to live together and mingle. And today, the dorms' refined, Gothic-style halls were noisy with the sound of chattering students.

There was good reason for that: the academy had just formally announced its combat training camp, which was held once every year. Students who'd shown a certain level of talent in their time at the academy so far would be forced to participate.

Any students aiming to become alchemists or magic tool crafters found it to be the ultimate pain in the butt. Most of those students were from merchant families or relatively well-off common families, not noble houses, and they weren't aiming to get into any sort of combat-based job.

At the same time, the camp was a good opportunity for students with iffy grades to improve themselves, so most students with poor academic records ended up taking part as well. Going on the camp gave you extra credit, so it was as almost as if *they* were forced to take part too, alongside the best students at the academy.

Ultimately, though, most students just wanted to get some hands-on practice in their future occupations. And so those who already had decent enough grades were largely uninterested in the camp.

Only a small portion of these students would go on to achieve anything amazing; most of them, magic or not, would end up just looking for a job like anyone else. And when they *did*, the fact that society here really only saw mages as being useful for attacking, in combat, meant that there weren't a whole lot of different roles available to fill. Sure, there were *some* mages in the capital and other big cities who helped out with things like wastewater management in the sewage system, but those jobs had a high barrier to entry.

Any civil service job here was hard to get into, and they only employed so many people, so you *needed* good grades to stand a chance. Your grades at the academy were also important if you wanted to be employed by the Order of Mages; and if you were a commoner, you'd need to have connections as well. Which essentially meant the factions—but even then, the Order of Mages was a state organization, so it still didn't have the budget to take in *everyone* who was part of a faction. Students who wanted to clear that high barrier to entry would need the extra credit this event could give them, but they weren't keen on the actual “taking part in the combat” part; at least, that was the general sentiment.

One way or another, all participants would be headed to a place called Ramaf Woods. It was home to some fairly powerful monsters—though it definitely wasn't as bad as the Far-Flung Green Depths. The Order of Knights often went there for its own combat training camps.

In short, it was the perfect hunting ground to teach the meaning of fear to any students who were overconfident in their own magic.

That was why this camp was part of the curriculum—though so far, it didn't seem to have been too successful at that.

Nevertheless, at least *one* of the students intending to go to the camp was filled to the brim with motivation. A blonde girl, specifically, wearing a robe over her academy-designated uniform. She was clenching a small fist and her blue eyes were open wide, shimmering as if she was looking forward to a fun time.

It was none other than Celestina von Solistia.

Previously, she'd been one of the academy's most inept students. But now, she was being called a *prodigy*.

In a short period of time, she'd gone from being unable to use magic to being able to control it at will. And the *power* of her magic was also far beyond what the other students could muster. She'd even grown stronger than her teachers by now, causing her to get quite the special treatment. It was something like: *There's nothing more for me to teach you now. You don't have to come to my lectures.* Though really, that was just their way of getting around the fact that

they were simply incapable of teaching such a brilliant student.

Those teachers had learned everything they knew from misinformed, misunderstood lectures themselves; they had no idea what sort of guidance they should be giving to a girl like her. They *wanted* to act like proper teachers, but Celestina had gone so far beyond the realms of a regular model student that they just didn't know how to respond.

At the end of the day, Celestina might have gone from incapable to excellent, but the teachers were largely ignoring her, the same as they always had.

To Celestina, though, that was entirely welcome, and she'd used the opportunity to rise to the challenge of improving on her family's heirloom magic. She was also taking part in classes that related to potions and magic tools, slowly but surely working toward the future she envisioned for herself. And today, the dorms had finally put up the formal notice of the annual camp—a notice she'd been waiting for.

"I've been looking forward to this. I just hope I haven't gotten rusty...♪"

"You seem to have become quite enamored by the thought of violence, milady. Do you not think your grandfather would cry to see it?"

"Miska, please... Don't make it sound like I'm some sort of crazy lady! I just want to get some exercise."

Celestina had been optimizing a range of spells as part of her plan to improve her heirloom magic.

She'd already memorized various spells that Zelos had improved, so she was able to decipher magic formulas more easily than if she were starting right from zero. But there were plenty of things she was struggling to identify too, so she was making less progress than she'd hoped.

Still, just sitting there all the time would be bad for her health, so she figured it'd be best to get out there and exercise on occasion as well.

"You see, milady, based on how you got when you were swinging around that mace over your summer break and pulverizing all those golems, I thought that surely..."

“Surely? Surely *what?*”

“That surely you’d picked up a hobby of bludgeoning things to death. But...all right. I see. It’s just *monsters* that you want to bludgeon to death; is that what you’re saying?”

“No! *Nothing* along those lines! Just what kind of person do you think I am?!”

“A mace fanatic. A lover of violence. A bludgeoning-obsessed girl. A murderous noble lady. A bloodstained duke’s daughter. Something like that, I suppose?”

For some reason, Miska had posed her little list of dishonorable nicknames as a question, as if she were looking for approval. The girl *wanted* to say they were absurd—but at the same time, she could see where they’d all come from, so she was having a hard time denying them.

“Mnh... I know I *have* been swinging my mace around a lot, but all of those titles feel so...”

“If things continue as they are, I can see you beating your poor future husband to death someday during a lovers’ spat. Please, milady, do try to learn about a little thing called ‘restraint.’”

“That’s...not something I’ve learned yet, I know. But I’m not *that* violent!”

“Oh, how you jest. I can see it perfectly clearly. Husband and wife getting into a fight; the wife straddling the husband, deadly mace in hand, *pulverizing* the poor man without end; the living room, a crime scene, splattered with blood; and myself, your loyal maid, required to clean it all up. Ah, I can already *feel* how difficult it will be to clean that all up...”

“Stop talking like you’re having a vision of the future! And are you implying you didn’t bother to stop the fight in the first place?!”

Miska simply responded with a quiet sigh, her expression not changing in the slightest. It was as if her attitude was muttering, *My oh my...just what is she saying, this silly girl...?*

“Milady, a maid’s duty is simply to watch over the home. To intervene in a crime would be far outside my job description. Is this not common knowledge?”

A widely accepted truth?”

“D-Did you just say *a crime*? You really are trying to paint me as a criminal here, aren’t you?!”

But Celestina’s protestations fell on deaf ears. The maid’s glasses lit up with a suspicious gleam, and she continued to speak, unfazed.

“And I, then, would drive you, the criminal, into a corner with my deductions. ‘I suspect that the culprit, milady...is *you!*’ I would say.”

“What do you mean, ‘deductions’? Weren’t you just saying you’d be a witness? You’d already *know* about the crime! You would’ve *seen me do it!* Plus, you were talking about cleaning up the crime scene! You’d be an *accomplice!*”

“An accomplice? No, no, I am nothing but a servant. Besides, I would *have* to fill two hours with pointless deductions, would I not? How else are people supposed to remain interested throughout the runtime?”

“What are you even talking about?! Anyway, shouldn’t you try to stop the murder from happening in the first place?!”

“I refuse. Why should I have to do something so boring as that? It would be much more exciting to corner the criminal after the fact. Perhaps it’s some sort of maidly instinct?”

“What’s a ‘maidly instinct’ even meant to *be*?! And there’d be no ‘cornering’ involved! You’d *know* I was the criminal! And again, *you’d. Be. An. Accomplice!*”

Miska responded with a somehow satisfied-looking smile and gestured as if she were wiping imaginary sweat from her brow.

“Milady, you must know; it is in the nature of a maid to investigate the truth behind any incident.”

“I’ve never *heard* of that before! What kind of maid are you even talking about?!”

“Why, it’s common sense in the maid industry. Even if you may not understand it, milady.”

No such thing existed, of course. Miska was simply an odd individual, and she

was having fun pestering Celestina. She rather enjoyed seeing the girl take her so seriously and get riled up, so on occasion, she ended up playing with her like this.

Not that all of her attempts had gone so well, of course...

“By the way, milady, what would you like to do about your equipment?”

“What? Can’t I just use the same set I brought with me on the other trip recently?”

“You are talking about the armor made from the scales of the white snake dragon, yes? That would make you stand out. It would alienate you from everybody else.”

“I suppose you’re right... Everyone else is going to be in the academy-designated equipment, so going with the same as last time *would* make me stand out.”

“In the worst case, I could see them saying, ‘Look at her, using her family’s connections.’ So, yes, I would recommend against using that particular set of armor.”

Celestina’s armor set was far better than even the armor supplied to members of the Order of Knights.

However, it was also the embodiment of her doting grandfather’s reckless behavior—and the distress that behavior had inflicted on a long list of people.

It wouldn’t be a good look for her to use it on this combat training camp.

“What should I do, then? The only other set I have is the armor I use for practice, but I’m not sure I could trust that to protect me properly...”

“It *is* only cheap armor, yes. It’s thanks to that, though, that you’ve become as sturdy as a dwarf. Do you truly believe you’d die so easily at this point?”

“Miska... Are you just casually implying that I’m no longer human? I might have gotten stronger, but I’m hardly as tough as a dwarf...”

“Oh, no, perish the thought. It’s merely your imagination; I would never suggest something like that. You *do* have quite the persecution complex, don’t you, milady? All I meant is that leveling up will have made you a fair bit stronger

than before.”

Celestina silently glared at her maid.

Miska’s blunt words didn’t seem to have an ounce of ill will behind them, but Celestina, the target of those words, puffed out her cheeks in irritation. The maid teased her like this precisely *because* she found this kind of childish response to be amusing...but Celestina hadn’t realized that.

“Anyway, should I just borrow a set of armor from the academy?”

“The armor they loan out is too outdated in design; frankly, I would prefer you refrain. It would not suit you well, milady.”

“But then, the only other thing I can think of is to buy one of the latest sets of the academy-designated armor from an arms store...”

“That simply would not do. It would not be made-to-order for you personally, so there would be various issues with the sizing. And it is *light* armor, made for mages, so I would not trust its defensive capabilities.”

All of the armor designated by the academy was made of leather, for the most part, with metal just used to reinforce the wearer’s vitals. The sets of armor available to borrow, meanwhile, were made from good materials...but their design was horribly behind the times. Honestly, they just looked lame.

Even the cheap, crude armor that mercenaries wore looked better than that.

Operating the academy required an exorbitant amount of money, spent on everything from the capture and transport of goblins to serve as targets in combat training to procuring magic stones and medicinal herbs used in alchemy.

The more fragile materials you used, the more money you’d need to spend on replacing them—and so the academy used old equipment for its rentals, in order to avoid putting any extra money toward *another* expense. Even that old equipment was sturdy enough, so it wasn’t a particular problem safetywise; but the younger generations tended to care a lot about appearances, so barely anyone actually borrowed it.

It *would* reduce the danger to your life, so it was a perfectly good choice.

Students with no combat experience usually failed to see that, though, and it wasn't like their teachers at the academy had done a proper job of pointing it out to them.

"Oh—how about reinforcing the armor I used for training? I've got some materials, and I'm sure there's a store in the academy that works with armor."

"Ah, milady, you truly *have* become like any other toughened mercenary... If the day comes when you start saying things like, *Hah! That monster over there's a tough 'un! I'm gettin' all fired up, lads!* your grandfather and I really will cry, you know?"

"I wouldn't speak like that!"

"Really? I would rather like to hear you say it, though..."

"Make up your mind already!"

Miska tended to keep a completely straight face when she was joking, so Celestina could only interpret the maid as if she were being serious.

The maid *did* have a good reason for her behavior, though.

The Celestina of old had spent every day poring over books with a ghastly devotion, trying desperately to gather information with a tormented look on her face. Since she had learned to use magic, though, it was as if a dark shadow had been lifted from her heart, and she'd started to show some real, earnest smiles again, like she had when she was younger. The sight made Miska feel truly happy—and so she couldn't help but tease the girl from time to time.

In short, seeing Celestina getting so emotional warmed Miska's heart, and made her want to keep watching over and protecting the girl.

Still, there might have been a *bit* of ill-natured teasing mixed in...

"Allow me to put the arrangements in place for your armor, then."

"Ugh... Thanks, Miska."

Celestina sighed, a tired expression on her face. And then, as she did every day, she made her way to the library.

Croesus's gait was heavy as he pushed a trolley laden with a mountain of books into the academy's great library, sometimes referred to as the "paper mountain."

Perhaps because he'd been at it for about a week now, his legs and back were screaming out for a break. Essentially, he was suffering from ongoing muscle pain—enough so that his whole body trembled now, making it hard for him to even grip a pen.

In the first place, this had only happened because he'd borrowed so many books without returning them. Maybe you could say he *deserved* it, then. But at the same time, the way he was pushing through the pain to diligently return the books was almost a touching effort.

"Oh, Croesus! Looks like you're having a hard time, hey~?"

"If that's what it looks like, Yi Ling, then how about you actually *help* me?"

"Nope! You've gotta teach your body a lesson so you know to be more careful next time~! You'll end up with bad habits otherwise, y'know?"

"Ugh. I feel like it's already too late for that... *Ow!*"

Croesus tried his best to take step after step, despite the pain in his legs and his back.

His passion for research was something to be admired, but at the end of the day, this situation was something he'd brought upon himself. Perhaps you could say he was lucky for getting any sympathy in the first place.

"If you think it's too late to stop the habit from forming, why don't you at least try to *fix* it?"

"You make a fair point...which only makes it hurt all the more to hear. The thing is, I'm the type to just get fixated on things..."

"Still~ If you borrow something, you've gotta return it, riiight?"

As he took tortured step after tortured step, Croesus's gait resembled that of a condemned criminal with a cross on his back, trudging to the site of his crucifixion.

In this case, his only crime had been laziness—but sloth was, at the end of the

day, one of the seven deadly sins. And the time had come for the sinner to pay the price.

Pushing through the pain, Croesus finally managed to get the books into the library.

But this was where the real problem began: at this academy, you got the front desk to confirm the books you were returning, but you had to put them back on the shelves yourself. In other words, he had to go up and down the stairs, over and over again, taking the books that had been checked and moving them to the correct shelf. When the shelf in question was on the first floor, it wasn't too bad, but he had to make a lot of trips to the second floor, and the third, and to the reference room underground, where the rarest, most valuable books were kept.

"This is the last lot! Keep it up!"

"I know, but...my body's..."

"*Fine*; I'll help you out with this part, 'kay~? So keep at it, all the way to the end!"

"I appreciate it. My legs feel so heavy, though... It's like they're made of lead."

Essentially, Croesus was a bit of a hopeless young man. And Yi Ling tended to look after him as if she were his mother.

Her personality made her well suited to looking after a mess like him. And from an outside perspective, the two of them looked like a great couple—especially considering the rumors that had been going around lately.

Watching that flirty couple from the shadows were a slew of pitiful boys crying bitter tears. All of them had feelings for Yi Ling—and burning flames of jealousy that drove them to curse Croesus without end.

"Should we off him?"

"No, we can't do anything that'd make her cry..."

"He's hogging our goddess all to himself, though! Do you really want to let him get away with it?!"

"I mean, it'd be a bad idea to do it *here*, right?"

“I’m *angry*, though! I feel like I’d need to kill a thousand people to calm down!”

“Me too...”

Yi Ling was surprisingly popular at this academy, something of an idol for the common students. She was considered one of the five great beauties of the academy—not that Croesus was aware of that. Apathetic as he was to the world around him, he didn’t even notice the spiteful glares being directed his way as he slowly pushed his trolley farther into the library.

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“*Aaargh!* How are we meant to optimize this damn thing?! Working with it’s *impossible!*”

“There’s probably something missing. What’s here should be fine as the part of the formula for gathering mana from nature; the problem will be fine-tuning it, I think. There are also things like how to allocate the mana inside ourselves and the mana from nature, and keeping a good balance with the other parts of the formula; plus the proportion of mana needed, and the limits of what you can set as the spell’s area...”

“I guess, yeah. Not to mention the limits for adjusting each attack’s power, as well as the valid range when you activate the spell...and how to divide the mana between all that. There’s no end to it once you get started listing stuff.”

“Making the spell more compact will mean switching it over to a layered sigil too—and that’ll mean integrating the layers, which will require us to tune them all to properly align their energy... This is incredibly difficult.”

Celestina and Zweit were in the academy library, working together to try and optimize their family’s heirloom magic. But it hadn’t taken long for their optimization efforts to hit a wall.

Magic in this world was used in the form of what were commonly called sigils, and the size and density of a formula that made up a given spell would have a major effect on its power and area of effect. For example, a formula for a spell that just created a tiny fire, like Torch, could be written down on a single, notepad-sized sheet of magic paper, but when it came to heirloom magic, you’d

need something big enough to cover an entire long table: a scroll on par with a huge world map.

You'd draw a complex sigil onto that paper and fill it with a magic formula for causing your desired phenomena, to complete a magic scroll. But things worked a little differently when it came to layered sigils.

A layered sigil took multiple sigils of the same size, each with its own command structure, and sandwiched them together vertically to overlap their contents. Between them were sigils for reading and conveying each other sigil's program, helping to fine-tune the overall formula and make it operate more efficiently. The different commands were overlapped to combine them, and pieced together by Spell Lines to read them all, with the end result being a sort of parallel processing that worked to activate the magic that the mage wanted to cast.

The more conventional, two-dimensional sigils took up a lot of space when they were etched into a mage's subconscious, limiting the number of spells each mage could memorize. But layered sigils, in contrast, were revolutionary, resolving that issue. If you were to compare how much information each type was capable of storing, it was like the old sigils were cassette tapes, while the layered sigils were more like CDs. The new magic that Zelos used, with his binary compression, would be more like a Blu-ray in that metaphor.

It wasn't as simple as saying, "Just make a layered sigil," though.

Since layered sigils were divided up between multiple command structures that overlapped to effectively process multiple magic formulas simultaneously, each layer's data processing had to be tuned precisely. The spell would activate in an instant, but it needed all of the components of the magic formula—the cogs of the machine—to mesh properly.

If the differing components of the command formula were flawed, the overlapping magic sigils would be unable to read each other, and the spell wouldn't even activate. A lack of coordination between the components would cause them to conflict with each other, leading to bugs in which each component effectively canceled the others out. And as a result, the formula as a whole would collapse.

When this happened, the spell would still consume the caster's mana, but it'd simply fail, with no effect. For a mage, it could be a fatal slipup.

And when it came to heirloom magic especially, it was something like trying to make your own digital watch by hand from the basic parts, without any blueprints, using only an analog watch as a reference. In other words, it was even *more* likely for that sort of collapse to occur.

"Converting mana into the physical phenomena, adjusting the power level, setting the control mechanisms, balancing the amount of mana that gets used, getting the right timing for reading the magic formula... *All* of these problems are tough!"

"Master was able to adjust this, though, wasn't he? So it's possible. But this formula...it's a really mean one!"

"Damn right. It's flat-out cruel, seriously..."

Making their task even worse than it would otherwise be was the complicated, obscure way in which this heirloom spell was constructed.

The formula was so flawed that they wouldn't have been surprised if it had been made like that specifically to annoy people trying to work with it. Yet at the same time it was somehow—miraculously—balanced *just* right, so that everything worked together as it was. But like a house of cards, if they wanted to mess with it at all, they'd have to topple it down to the basics and rebuild it from there. Which was what had the two of them at their wits' ends.

"Maybe it was too early for Master to ask us to improve our heirloom magic..."

"Yeah, why'd Teach give us homework like *this*? There's no way we'll be able to do it..."

"I wonder if he had some purpose in mind? No, I'm *sure* of it—there's some kind of deep reason behind this task. There must be."

"Who knows. I've got no idea what he's thinking..."

"It sounds like the two of you are discussing quite the difficult topic. You seem to be stuck; what's the problem?"

The two of them turned to face the sudden voice—and saw their brother, Croesus.

For the most part, he had an imposing, haughty air to him...though it was betrayed by the pitiful way his legs were shaking.

“Whoa. Your legs sure are shaking there, huh?”

“You look like a newborn foal. What happened to you, Brother?”

“I’ve spent the last few days making trips back and forth between here and my lab. Over and over again. My stamina’s really at its limits... Don’t get into it, please.”

“You should at least keep your room clean, man. You know you only ended up like this because you never gave a shit until it got too late, right?”

“I know. And it doesn’t help that I’m so out of shape...”

Zweit’s private life might have been a mess metaphorically, but he at least made sure to keep things around him clean enough.

Celestina, meanwhile, had never been the type to keep anything she didn’t need. She wasn’t the sort of girl to keep a collection of soft toys or the like in her room.

Then there was Croesus. When it came to keeping his living space clean, he was just about the textbook definition of a slob.

Each of the three siblings had a very different personality.

“Anyway, leaving that aside... It sounded like you were having trouble with something?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. It’s just... We’ve realized that as we are now, we don’t stand a chance of improving on our family’s heirloom magic.”

“I *do* think that’s a ridiculous task, yes. In the first place, even just deciphering its formula is probably impossible. A single spell is the culmination of all the long hours of research that have gone into it! Of *course* it wouldn’t be easy to remake it.”

“You’re right. In which case, I struggle to see what Master’s intentions are.

Why would he have given us a task like this? I'm sure there must be *some* reason, but..."

The two of them were unable to understand what the middle-aged mage had been thinking.



He hadn't actually given it much thought in the first place, though. He'd given them the task on the assumption that they'd fail. But the students, knowing him as a Great Sage, assumed that there must be some kind of mysterious, grand design behind his actions.

"Besides, do you really think you'll get that far with remaking our heirloom magic without honing your skills on some more basic spells first? This isn't the kind of thing you'll be able to do just because you've learned a little bit about magic formulas."

Croesus's siblings responded together: "Wha—?!"

From somewhere in the back of their minds, they remembered Zelos saying: *If you manage to improve some other spells too, that's even better.* In other words, he'd been laying the groundwork to push them toward researching *other* spells in the name of optimizing their family's heirloom spell.

Of *course* there was no way that mages with barely more knowledge than amateurs would be able to improve on such an absurdly complicated spell. But they were understanding, now, that the task had been a pretext to get them to first research other spells—to build up the experience that would allow them to create more intricate formulas down the line.

The two of them had been so entranced by the promise of the finest magic conduits a Great Sage could make that they'd overlooked that very substantial detail.

"You've got a nasty way of doing things, Teach..."

"So he knew it would be impossible in the first place, did he? Which is why he tried to encourage us to study other spells too..."

"I don't entirely understand what's going on, but I think I can empathize with him. If researching magic was so easy, our country would've become a superpower by now, I imagine. Research isn't something you can succeed at in just a day."

"You're kind of a hermit yourself... I bet you *can* empathize with him, yeah. Guess Teach tricked us."

Both Croesus and Zelos were shut-ins, in a way.

The main difference was just that the former stayed holed up researching the whole time, while the latter liked to be self-sufficient and do a little part-time work to earn some money with which to get by. But both of them were essentially cut from the same cloth, finding things like wealth and fame to be pointless.

Sure, *most* people wouldn't be able to sympathize with Zelos. But there were a decent number of people out there with warped mindsets like his.

One of the two felt a great sense of worth in doing research, and threw away everything else to indulge himself in it. The other one had *lost* that sense of worth; a loss that had twisted him, brought him to despair, and driven him to wish for a quiet life. But they were two sides of the same coin.

"Just what kind of person *is* this master of yours?"

"He's amazing—but he's a crazy guy. Like he's got a screw loose somewhere."

"I'd say he's...strict? Especially on himself. Though...yes, 'crazy' is right."

In short, he was someone with a broken, warped personality. Maybe you could put a positive spin on it by saying he was *particular about things*, but at the end of the day, he was something like a hermit. Croesus could kind of empathize with him, but at the same time, he didn't want people to think he was the same as *that*.

"*Hey!* Croesus! Why are you slacking off?!"

The three siblings turned to the direction of the voice and saw a girl with books under her arms, cheeks puffed out in a pout, pointing at Croesus. It was Yi Ling, who'd been helping Croesus.

"Oh... I completely forgot."

"You're so *mean*! Making me carry all the books, while you just go off and have fun chatting with— Huh? Oh! It's Croesus's famous siblings!"

Celestina and Zweit exchanged a dubious glance. "Famous?"

"People are saying the two of you have, like, a really *close, special* relationship, you know, for siblings! I'm hearing it everywhere~!"

“The hell?!”

“Why is this the first I’m hearing of this rumor...?”

Yi Ling’s bombshell remark left the two of them shaking.

Neither of them remembered coming across a rumor like that before; this was the first time they’d heard of it.

“*She’s* the one who started it, by the way. She happened to see the two of you here together one day, and she started gossiping about it.”

“Heeey! Croesus! Why’d you have to tell them?!”

“So it was *you*, huh?! What the hell have you done to us?!”

“Brother? I think you should choose your girlfriends more carefully. This girl seems to be a little too loose-lipped... *Ehe heh.*”

“You’ve got the wrong idea. We’re not in that kind of relationship. A— Wait. Celestina? Where’d you get that mace from?”

Accused of false charges, Celestina and Zweit were justifiably enraged. Celestina had old Creston’s blood flowing through her veins, after all, and it seemed like that blood was liable to boil over when she got emotional. Or was this the first time it had happened, perhaps? Whatever the case, it was scary to see that it ran in the family to *this* extent.

“Hmmm? That’s a weird formula you’ve got there, hey~?”

“Yi Ling! This is, um...”

“Eh, don’t worry. She won’t even understand what she’s looking at. Especially since she doesn’t know how to decipher formulas.”

“But this is our family’s—”

“It’s fine. The formula’s got so many parts, and this is just one of them. And I’d be amazed if she had any idea what it even meant.”

When Celestina and Zweit had broken down the formula for their heirloom magic to try and reconstruct it, they had ended up with a vast number of different components.

The spell scroll Zelos had handed over to Creston had been about the size of a

whole *bundle* of regular scrolls; if you tried to translate that to sheets of magic paper, it was hard to tell how many you'd need. Understanding what was going on when you'd only seen a single part wouldn't just make you a genius—it'd make you a god.

"Now that you mention, it seems like there aren't enough parts to this formula. It doesn't even seem all that different to the formulas used for beginner magic..."

"The idea is, if you put a component that incorporates a program in between multiple other components, you can make the formula as a whole operate way more efficiently. But the problem is, we've got no clue how to make them mesh together. If anything's even the tiniest bit off, the whole thing stops working."

"Oh... This is magnificent. Layering them up like that to have them build on each other and make a three-dimensional sigil... If this could be made to actually activate, mages would be able to learn so many more spells..."

"Yeah~ You'd be able to make big spells really compact, hey? I've never seen a formula like this before."

The formula was divided up over sigils for different parts of the process, which were then built back on top of each other and combined to form a single, three-dimensional sigil.

A layered design meant that sigils could be kept more compact within the user's subconscious, allowing them to learn virtually as many layered sigils as they wanted. But as revolutionary as these sorts of sigils were, they were difficult to adjust.

An apt comparison might be that if the old type of sigils were a messy room with things scattered randomly all over the floor, layered sigils were a room where everything was neatly arranged in cupboards and shelves. Neatly putting everything away in specific places increased the number of magic formulas you were able to store.

"The formulas for the optimized spells our pops has been selling just use regular sigils, and even *then* they ended up pretty small, y'know? I was able to learn a decent number of attack spells, at least."

“I... I think I might send a letter to Father later. I’d very much like to use some of that magic myself.”

“I’m not sure you’ll have much luck with that at the moment. Father only has so many mages working under him, so he’s struggling to keep up with demand for the scrolls.”

“So this is where I have to pay the price for not going home over the break, is it...? It’s unfortunate, but I suppose I can’t do much about it.”

Croesus had suddenly started to feel a great sense of regret.

“Anyway, Croesus—let’s get you back to cleaning up, okay~?”

“Wai— Yi Ling! You don’t have to drag me! I’m not running anywhere!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m not buying it. You always get sooo caught up in researching something the second I take my eye off you, so I’m going to make sure you can be a good boy who finishes cleaning up after himself. Understand?”

Again, Zweit and Celestina exchanged glances. And then, together: “Is she his mother?”

Croesus was dragged away by Yi Ling, who looked every bit the part of a mother disciplining her child.

Not long after, the two siblings saw Croesus making his way up a staircase on trembling legs, his arms full of books.

Behind him was Yi Ling, incessantly prodding him along.

“Brother Croesus has...changed, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah... It really *was* a woman, huh? I *swear*, every damn guy I see’s had some woman come along and change his life...”

Zweit generally had his head screwed on straight—the issue of his foul mouth aside—but for whatever reason, he wasn’t popular with women.

He wasn’t yet aware of the main reason for that: at first impression, he simply *looked scary*.

Only the gods could know whether springtime would eventually come for Zweit.

Chapter 10: Everyone Prepares for the Camp

Beside the main school building for the Istol Academy of Magic's high school department was a research building that only the students with top grades could use.

It had mainly been built in the hopes that talented young mages would devote themselves further to their studies there, allowing them to reach even greater heights. But nowadays, it had turned largely into a backdrop for students from the different factions to quarrel with each other.

The Saint-Germain faction, which had little interest in those quarrels, simply continued to go about their research. But that was decidedly *not* the case for another, much more radical group: the Wiesler faction.

The Wiesler faction had originally been formed with the purpose of training up young mages to shoulder battle strategy research and national defense in the future. But at some point along the way, they had transformed into a group advocating for mage supremacism. A major cause of that had been a sigil blueprint, unearthed from ancient ruins, for a wide-area annihilation spell. But the sigil had been incomplete, and the faction's efforts to finish it had reached a standstill.

In the first place, "ancient ruins" was a vague term, covering sites from a huge span of time. You had the Age of Dawn, which saw the beginning of civilization; the Age of Conflict, full of battles for land; the Age of Prosperity, when the bulk of people lived in peace; and the Age of Decay, where society had come close to ruin. This particular sigil was from the early stages of civilization, when knowledge of magic had still been immature.

At the time, people had used their own internal mana to cast spells; it wasn't until the later Age of Conflict that the method of using mana from the natural world was invented. This sigil was, of course, something designed on the presumption that multiple mages would be supplying it with mana, but even then, this wide-area annihilation magic had a major flaw.

Mana had the property of transforming into multiple different elements, but it also had the property of being affected by the caster's mental state.

If multiple mages were to cast the same spell together, then they'd need to be aligned with each other mentally. By stimulating their minds in parallel, it would be possible to activate the spell; but given that there were inherently differences between people's minds, it was hard to believe that multiple mages would be able to align themselves like that. Each and every person's mind had its own unique waves to it, and it would be impossible to make them uniform.

It wasn't a matter of just pooling your mana with someone your heart aligned with; aligning people's *minds* together that perfectly just wouldn't be possible unless you had clones of the same person. And that hardly seemed like a plausible solution.

In short, the mages had been held back by their own individualities, preventing the sigil from activating.

For that reason, wide-area annihilation spells created during the Age of Conflict had switched over to utilizing the mana from nature. But even then, the sigils themselves had become ridiculously large, making them infeasible to use as anything but an artillery battery fixed to castles and forts.

The closest comparison to modern weaponry on Earth would probably be a short-range ballistic missile.

During the Age of Dawn and in the Dark God War, magic tools had been made for creating sigils. But they too had proved ineffective against the Dark God, leading to failure in battle. The large-scale destruction that followed saw wide-area annihilation magic erased from history without a trace—apart from the extremely rare discovery of some kind of flawed relic in a ruin somewhere.

Many of those relics were from early civilization too, holding no worth apart from their historical value...though the Wiesler faction was unaware of that.

Of course, the sigil had been improved, and it could activate now to some extent. But it was still far from the point of being usable in battle.

After all, how were they meant to mount a proper attack with the thing if all they'd managed to do was make the sigil glow a little bit?

Samtrol and his cronies, however, had no doubt in their minds that they could get good use out of this sigil. Essentially, they'd gotten their hands on a faulty, useless tool, and it had made them nothing but arrogant and overoptimistic.

If it were only Samtrol himself who had grown arrogant, there wouldn't have been that much of a problem. But when there were *multiple* people like that, it was definitely going to be an issue.

They had gradually started turning into a group of ruffians and expanding their influence—thanks in large part to secret manipulation through brainwashing magic. Lately, however, the tides had begun to turn against them.

“Are you a *moron*, Samtrol?! This'd just be treating the soldiers as disposable pawns! Are you even *thinking* about any of this?!”

“What's wrong with that?! The knights *are* nothing but disposable pawns! As are the ignorant masses who get conscripted from among the peasants!”

“Your ‘plan’ is nothing but a reckless suicide attack! And why the hell are you relying on that wide-area annihilation magic? We don't even know if it'll turn out to be usable or not!”

The Wiesler faction was back at another of what the other factions referred to behind their backs as “armchair theory sessions.” It was where students in the faction met up to discuss strategies for use in combat.

“We're with you. Just *think* about it. Samtrol—your strategy's assuming that every enemy we face is going to move how we want them to, right? But is that really gonna happen? Did you not even consider there might be an ambush or something? How can you just assume that every enemy you face is going to be an idiot? You can hardly even call something this naive a strategy at all.”

“Yeah! This idea of a ‘strategy’ would only work on bandits! Wars between countries aren't going to be that simple!”

These students had all been brainwashed at the previous meeting, but Zweit's complete rebuttal of Samtrol's moronically optimistic strategies—combined with the harsh criticisms that Zweit had made based in military theory—had started to break open that veil of brainwashing, driving the more serious mages among them to go and revise their understanding of history from scratch.

They'd gone and looked into strategy from various perspectives, and come to understand just how ignorant and foolish the plans they'd been coming up with before had been.

As a result, the holes in the brainwashing had opened wider and wider, and eventually, a number of the students had been able to fully break free from its effects, one after another. Currently, the faction was divided between the realists and those who were still living in a dream, and it was turning into a fierce debate.

The former of those groups now had their heads firmly in the real world, like Zweit. The latter remained in Samtrol's camp.

But now that the brainwashing magic had started to come apart at the seams, Samtrol's side was losing more and more people.

Zweit, on the other hand, was coming to be seen as something of a representative of the realists—a development that maddened Samtrol to no end.

“Unless we somehow end up with an infinite number of soldiers, we have to think about what our enemy's capable of too. The strategies *you* guys are coming up with are the sort that only the most incompetent commander could ever come up with. Rejected!”

“Just who do you cretins think I am—”

“A student! You're *just*. A. Student! Your authority as a noble doesn't mean anything here! Besides, wasn't it *your own family* that kick-started the focus on realistic strategies?! Are you trying to tear down everything your ancestors have built up?!”

Samtrol grimaced at the words.

These were the same students who'd been submissive to him when they were brainwashed. But now, with the magic lifted, there was suddenly a big backlash, and they were baring their fangs at him. Word had gotten around about Bremait's brainwashing magic.

Mages were relatively good at sensing the flow of mana—and even now, there was somebody keeping a close eye on any movements Bremait might

make. If he wanted to try and brainwash them again, he'd need to lace his words with mana, but now that he was being watched, it was highly likely that he'd be noticed if he tried even using the tiniest *bit* of mana, so it was virtually impossible for him to brainwash them again.

"We don't even know if we'll be able to *use* the wide-area annihilation magic yet. There's no point making strategies that rely on it."

"I agree! It's obviously pointless. And anything that just uses up our fighting force without any gain can't be called a *strategy*."

"Agreed. Assuming that every enemy is that weak is naive at best. We can't forget we're dealing with *humans*."

"I also agree. I mean, in the first place, how's a small army force meant to defeat a force of ten thousand? Just logically, it doesn't make any sense."

"Agreed... The force from a fort would just be overrun. Retreating would be the smart option. There's no way you'd be able to wipe out the enemy."

Once the first fractures had started to appear in the students' trust of Samtrol, the cracks had only continued to spread.

Finally, even those who'd been on Samtrol's side were starting to agree with the others, bringing his plot closer and closer to ruin. He was being driven into a corner.

He could practically hear the sound of everything he'd built so far crumbling around him.

"It's not even worth *discussing* your strategy. If *that's* what you're going with, we'd be far better off with Zweit's."

"His was...out there. He pretty much always assumed we'd be getting annihilated..."

"He had a reason for it, though. The idea was to practice minimizing casualties as much as you can, and coming back alive, when you're at a hopeless disadvantage."

"Yeah. As long as you're alive, you've always got another chance. And he was planning to restore the country too. It's actually pragmatic."

“Meanwhile, Samtrol...what *you’re* coming up with is so stupid it can’t even be compared.”

This was the result of Samtrol’s efforts to get a hold of political power while taking it easy.

He’d managed to get Zweit banned from entering the faction meetings to prevent him from saying anything unnecessary, but as long as they were all students, they could still talk just as easily in the dorms. And so a team of battle tactics researchers had formed around Zweit and his allies—a team that was now looking into Samtrol and his lackeys as well. It seemed like the ripples would continue to spread.

Before long, a chime rang out, signaling that it was time for the students to return to their dorms. The strategy meeting was over. Samtrol and Bremait could do nothing but watch with grim expressions as the other students walked away.

“Fuck! That Zweit bastard...telling the rest of them things they didn’t need to hear!”

“Looks like they know all about my magic now too. I was being watched the whole time.”

“This is *infuriating*... But we can’t lay a hand on him! He’s the son of a duke. He *knows* we can’t touch him, and that’s why he’s being such a brazen little *shit*...”

Samtrol was harboring some intense hatred for Zweit. But that tended to come part and parcel with being so self-centered and arrogant. And people like that had a tendency to forget things that were inconvenient for them too. Specifically that *they* were the ones who had started it by meddling with Zweit. In other words, they were reaping what they’d sowed...but they were big enough idiots that they couldn’t even realize it.

“So what do we do? If we make a move, we’ll be the prime suspects.”

“There’s that combat training camp soon, right? We’ll make something happen then.”

“I see... If we do that, we could get his death passed off as just an accident.”

“Get in touch with *them* before it’s too late. We can’t leave Zweit unchecked any longer!”

They had decided to use their final resort. It was the sort of plan that would usually have been unthinkable for a person to adopt, but they were so caught up in their greed that they were far beyond common sense. They sat in the room alone, now, secretly planning out their dastardly plot.

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“So, Croesus—what’re you going to do about the combat training camp?”

“Well, I’d really rather not take part... I just want to continue my research. It’s going to be a waste of time.”

So spoke Croesus in gloomy tones, holed up inside the research building and leafing through ancient language dictionaries.

He was no good at anything physical. He was better suited to researching like this, and he was proud of it.

Excellent students, however, were forced to participate. This outdoor course, referred to as the combat training camp, was an entirely unwelcome event for him. He heaved a sigh, a depressed look on his face.

“Generally you don’t have to take part if you don’t want to, but in your case, you’re forced to, yeah...”

“That’s the problem. What’s the point of forcing researchers to practice in combat like that? It’s optional for everyone else! It doesn’t make sense!”

“But, you know, Croesus... Maybe you *should* try and get a little stronger! Your muscles still hurt from carrying back all those books, right?”

“I can tough things like that out if it’s for the sake of my research, I promise you. But combat training’s no joke... What are *you* going to do, Serina?”

“I’ll pass! It sounds like a pain.”

Here she was, trying to convince him to go to the training camp when she refused to join in herself.

Croesus was starting to wish that he’d thought to get slightly lower grades on

purpose. Students with middling grades were free to choose whether to participate or not, and Croesus was jealous of them to no end.

“I’ve gotta take part too. I’ve skipped out on too much stuff; my credits are looking real dicey.”

“Makarov... You brought that on yourself. You always spend all your time just playing around.”

“Hey! I go to my alchemy classes, at least!”

“Well, *yeah*, but, I mean, they’re the *only* ones you go to. Right, Makarov~?”

“Leave me alone!”

Makarov was getting annoyed by Yi Ling’s teasing. It was true that he only ever took that one type of class, but his grades in that class were actually rather good. He had a sharp mind, but he was set on a particular career, and he had no interest in classes that didn’t relate to it.

Largely because of that, he often ended up relying on Croesus to help him out the day before a test.

“Oh, hey—these magic characters look like this word from one of the ancient languages, don’t they?”

“Which one? Tell me.”

“Looks like Elvish. And it means... ‘Wind,’ I think?”

“There’s one over here too! ‘Converge’ in Dwarven.”

“I’ve found one as well. Is it...the Beastfolk word for ‘power,’ maybe?”

The four of them were splitting up work on the task of deciphering magic formulas. Each of them was looking through formulas, trying to find strings of magic characters that resembled an ancient language and then use those strings as references to find a word from each species’ ancient language that seemed like it could fit.

“So they really *were* words. The magic characters were the common ancestor of the ancient languages.”

“Hang on! If that’s true, then what about everything we were taught as

common sense about magic formulas? Has it all been meaningless?”

“I probably wouldn’t call it *meaningless*, but it *would* mean we’ve been learning a lot of things that were misunderstood, yes.”

“What are these nonsensical characters here meant to mean, then? No way we can read that!”

“That’s probably a section that was added in later to alter the spell. That’s why it’s nonsensical.”

Serina and Makarov were shocked. Both of them got decent grades, but this was almost like being told that everything they’d worked so hard to learn had been *wrong*. Makarov wasn’t quite as shocked as Serina, perhaps, but it had still hit him hard.

“Hmm~? But, Croesus, your brother and sister were already deciphering these, weren’t they? Does that mean you were the only one who didn’t know how?”

“They learned how to do it when they went back to see the family over our summer break. I missed out on that opportunity without even knowing it was there. Unfortunately.”

“Does that mean there was some mage there who taught them how to decipher the formulas? Just what kind of mage *is* that?”

“Right? If there were such an impressive mage out there, I’m certain we’d have at least heard rumors of them by now...”

“A traveling mage, apparently. A dangerous one—one who goes around the place testing out their theories in battle.”

The others were all lost for words. If that was true, it would mean that that unknown mage had some impressive wisdom when it came to magic. And if that fact got out into society, the future of the academy itself could be at risk.

After all, if that mage was capable of deciphering magic formulas, it would mean that everything the academy was teaching was inferior to the knowledge of a single, unknown mage. A revelation like that could cause society’s faith in the academy to hit rock bottom.

While it wasn't as if *everything* the academy taught was wrong, it *would* suddenly make about sixty percent of everything taught there meaningless. And if that were to happen, it wouldn't just be the academy coming under fire; it'd be the factions too.

"Well, my grandfather's a mage too. He's probably already gotten hold of the deciphering method for himself—though really, what's in it for him at this stage? It sounds like he's already doing well selling those superefficient spell scrolls, after all."

"The Solistia faction, led by the Mage of Purgatory... I can see it turning into a powerful group."

"I've heard he's going around trying to completely crush the sources of funding for the other factions!"

"That'd be my *father*, most likely. And I think *we'll* be all right, at least. Seeing as we don't have anything in our minds apart from research. And we earn our operating funds through fair contracts with merchants."

"In that case, he'd be going after...the Wiesler faction, right~?"

The Wiesler faction had been the talk of the town lately. There were even incidents of faction members being violent like common thugs around town, requiring military police to be deployed. And now, it was sounding like they'd started to have an internal split—a split centered around Croesus's own brother, Zweit.

"There's something I've been discussing with my brother: apparently, people in the Wiesler faction were brainwashed with some sort of mind-affecting magic. I imagine he's been getting back at them now that the spell's come undone."

"What? Isn't that a big crime?!"

"Yeah! It's usually forbidden to cast magic on other people!"

"The thing is, mental magic doesn't leave behind any evidence. But it can start to fade if there are fluctuations in the target's emotions, so maybe my brother's been intentionally causing mayhem to make that happen."

Mental magic wasn't permanent. It could bring about temporary disorder in the target's mind, but it couldn't keep someone brainwashed forever. The fact that humans had emotions meant that their mana inherently tended to get disturbed in irregular ways. It was similar to the way in which emotions affected magic: strong emotions like anger could temporarily improve the force of your attacks, while being in a mental slump could make your magic weaker.

What was more, mental magic would fade over time due to the refreshing of the target's internal mana unless you continued to recast it periodically.

Zweit breaking out of the spell had caused the first ripple—a ripple that had then become a wave, releasing the other targets' minds from the spell's effect. Now they were angry at having been brainwashed, and they were directing that anger squarely at the key culprit who had done that to them.

Unfortunately, that key culprit was doing his best to play the victim here; it was infuriating. But that attitude of his had only served to further enrage the *real* victims, and the situation was now escalating to open up a rift within the faction.

"But, well... Samtrol, was it~? I don't hear many good things about him, y'know~?"

"Yeah. I've heard he's got connections to the underworld, for one."

"Someone said they saw him eating together with some sort of shady people like that, yeah! From what I heard, it looked like they were discussing a deal for something."

"Let's just hope whatever mess they're cooking up doesn't spill over and affect us. More importantly—you've stopped moving. We're meant to be *researching* right now. Make sure you do a proper job."

Pressured by Croesus, the others got back to their deciphering work. Before long, though:

"By the waaay... It's almost lunch. Are we gonna eat here?"

"It's that time already? Hmm... How about we eat at the cafeteria? With *you two* paying, of course."

“*Ngh!* This month is pretty tight for me, y’know...”

“Me too! I’ve, um, had to buy a lot of things...”

“It’s your punishment for spreading such a stupid rumor. You should be thankful I’m not *suing* you.”

Ultimately, Serina and Makarov were forced to pay for lunch, halving the bill between them.

It was their own loose lips that had caused rumors to pop up around Croesus and Yi Ling, so they were getting what they deserved.

This was one of just several lunches that the culprits would end up having to treat their “victims” to. Their words had led to disaster—albeit not of the life-and-death sort. This was just another day in the Saint-Germain faction, the students whiling their hours away on research without a worry about the machinations going on around them.

As long as their research didn’t fall behind, they couldn’t care less if everyone around them was making a racket.

In a sense, perhaps it was the most peaceful of all the factions.

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“Hey, have you heard? Sounds like a feud’s started up in the Wiesler faction!”

“Apparently there was a fight between the son of Duke Solistia and that rotten kid of Marquess Wiesler.”

“Huh? Wasn’t Duke Solistia’s kid just as rotten?”

“Well, the rumor going around is that one of Samtrol’s lackeys cast brainwashing magic on other people in the faction!”

“Seriously? That’s a pretty huge violation of the academy’s rules!”

Large as the academy grounds were, they were still compact enough for rumors like this to spread like wildfire.

In particular, the smaller-scale groups regarded as weak factions were keeping a close eye on the movements of the two major factions.

“People were saying there was some kind of disagreement within the faction,

right?”

“What I heard was that some of them were found working with some kind of shady organization. The others found them out and started working for reform!”

“I heard that asshole Samtrol tried to sexually assault Sir Zweit! They say he tried to strip him naked, only to get the tables turned on him...”

“What? I heard Sir Zweit was going to change the faction into a *physical* one. One focused on big, juicy muscles...≡” That last gossipier was drooling a little as she spoke.

Okay, so perhaps some of the rumors going around were truer than others. One way or another, though, this was the kind of talk that had been going around these past few days.

As for *why* things had ended up like that...

“Hey, Diio... Did you tell them about the brainwashing magic thing too? I don’t have any *proof* for that part!”

“Well, uh, it kind of just...happened. I was talking to someone while you were going to the toilet, and I sort of just let it slip...”

“By the way, not that it really matters, but what was up with that last rumor? I don’t remember suddenly obsessing over being all macho!”

“I guess it’s because people saw you training with a sword every day? Sure, you do it early in the morning, but there *are* probably other students who get up early.”

“But how does *that* lead to the whole ‘juicy muscles’ thing?! And what about the rumor of me getting it on with another guy?!”

“Eh, that one really pinned the blame on Samtrol, so you shouldn’t have to worry too much about it, should you? But...wait. Maybe I’ll end up getting dragged into that one too, sooner or later...”

Diio was hesitant to let people start imagining him in an illicit relationship with his best friend. He promptly decided that if that sort of rumor reached Celestina’s ears, he’d have no choice but to hang himself.

Zweit felt much the same; he wanted nothing more than for those sorts of rumors to go away as quickly as possible.

“Anyway, what are you gonna do for this combat training camp? I forget—are you able to use any weapons?”

“Nah, I’m no good with them. Not yet. Still, I don’t wanna end up dead, so I *have* been taking part in some close-quarters combat training.”

“Huh? *I’ve* never seen you doing it. When’s this?”

“Three times a week. When you’re in class. I’m lucky there’s someone in my faction who knows how to use weapons.”

“That’s good, I guess, but...take real combat too lightly and you’ll die. There’s stuff you just can’t learn from training alone.”

Zweit’s mind went back to his mock battles against the golems. He’d spent hellish days in what felt like almost impossible fights against golems that regenerated time and time again unless their cores were destroyed. Thanks to that, he’d managed to learn swordsmanship and hand-to-hand combat skills—skills that he’d then enjoyed the process of coming to master. The knowledge that he was definitely getting stronger had left him overjoyed, and the firm sense of resistance he’d come to feel when he swung his sword had brought a huge grin to his face.

He was continuing to come up with his own ways of fighting with both sword and magic simultaneously, testing them out, then looking for any problems with them before repeating the cycle, allowing him to get stronger each time. He was also eagerly taking part in any classes that he thought were necessary, such as alchemy and medicine.

“What kind of training were you taking back at home, Zweit? You said it used golems, but most mages can only use a few of them at once, right?”

“The mage who was controlling them has some insane abilities. He’s able to summon like thirty of the things at once—and keep them constantly attacking the target from close range.”

“That’d usually be impossible, right? Just who *is* that mage?”

“You’re better off not knowing. But if I had to sum him up in a word...he’s a monstrosity. He’s strong enough that our teachers wouldn’t even stand the tiniest chance against him.”

“If he’s *that* good, I feel like he should be famous already... How’s he still a no-name?”

“Because he wants to be. If he got tangled up with the rich and powerful, he wouldn’t be as free to research anymore. Besides, he can already just sell monster materials to get a decent amount of money; if he were a mercenary, there wouldn’t be a big fuss over that, right? Especially with how he travels around the country all the time.”

Diio just couldn’t form an image in his mind of this mage who’d trained up Zweit.

Everything he was hearing seemed to be beyond the realms of common sense; it was all so absurd as to be unbelievable.

Still, the man *had* trained up Celestina, who’d been incapable of using magic, into a “prodigy” over the course of just two months, so it at least went without saying that he *was* leagues ahead of the teachers at the academy.

“You know, we’ve got the perfect environment for magic research here, and it’s going nowhere. If one guy like that’s doing so well, then...is the problem just the teachers here?”

“Looks like it, yeah. Researchers like him can probably always come up with *some* way to earn money, whatever environment they’re in, if they have to. If he wanted to get money as a mercenary, there’s plenty of prey out there he’d have an easy time with.”

“You *can* get a lot of materials and magic stones from monsters, yeah. I know it can be pretty lucrative if you pick the right prey. That teacher of yours sounds way outside the realm of common sense, though.”

“Seems like it’s all just a hobby for him, something he does for the satisfaction. Not sure novices like us could ever understand him.”

“Honestly, I don’t think I want to meet that teacher of yours.”

“I think you should worry more about running into my grandfather...”

The thought left Diio frozen in fear.

The two of them remained in silence as they headed to the academy’s training grounds.

Gathered there were around fifty students who belonged to the Wiesler faction.

“Finally here? You’re late, Zweit.”

“My bad. It took me a while to find Diio; he was off training by himself.”

“Riiight... Speaking of Diio, why’s he look like he’s about to die?”

“Don’t get into it. He’s been playing with fire—and now he’s trying to escape reality.”

“I don’t get it.”

Diio’s life was in the palm of a crazed old man who doted rather too much on his granddaughter.

“Doesn’t matter—let’s hurry up and start our melee practice. Hand-to-hand fighting techniques aren’t popular at the academy, so Instructor Barban’s all pumped up.”

“Makes sense, I guess. He hasn’t had much to do until now. Bet he’s happy to suddenly have all these students wanting him to teach them.”

Walking with a look of glee toward the gathered Wiesler faction students was a skinhead mage with a rather muscular—no, *ripped*—physique. It looked like his muscles were threatening to tear open his robe at any moment.

As much as he was dressed like a mage, he gave off the vibe of a warrior who’d spent a long time hopping from one dangerous battlefield to the next.

“So you’re all here, huh? Glad to hear you’re motivated. Don’t worry; I’ll pummel the basics of hand-to-hand combat into you all real good!”

“We appreciate it. We want to be able to protect ourselves from enemy soldiers chasing after us if we end up in a battle where we have to retreat. And if the enemy uses magic tools, they could even conceal themselves—so we

need to be prepared to fight on an open battlefield too, just in case.”

“Good! You’ve made the right choice, coming here. Happy to see it. Most students nowadays think they can just fire off spells from the back lines, but the battlefield ain’t gonna be that kind to you. Sometimes, you’ll need to retreat; sometimes, you’ll have to fight in the rear guard. And if you *do* end up in a melee like that, any mage who can’t defend themselves will be in danger. In other words—you wanna protect yourself, you *need* to know how to fight up close and personal.”

“There’ll probably also be times when we need to go to the front line to minimize casualties among our allies, right? So would the best fighting style be one that focuses on mobility?”

“That’s definitely one thing, but you lot are still mages. There’s no need for you to fight like knights. Whatever approach you’re using, support from your allies is gonna be important—don’t forget that.”

The students responded together: “Yes, sir!”

“That’s a good answer. Now—it’s time for me to hammer some fighting skills into you lot before your training camp. You ready?!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

The vibe here was developing in a bit of an odd direction. Zweit was getting a bad premonition.

And so began the melee combat training. This day would mark the beginning of a seemingly endless barrage of abusive language, echoing out in a loud voice from a corner of the Istol Academy of Magic.

This torrent of abuse—the specifics of which can’t be written, for ethical reasons—would continue until two days before the combat training camp.

As would the screams of the students...

Chapter 11: The Old Guy Dreams about the Past

Satoshi Osako had been called to the top of a twenty-story building, to a room that offered an impressive city view through its tempered glass walls.

As he entered, he saw his company's bigwigs sitting at a table, all looking at him with stern expressions on their faces.

He knew why he was here: this was going to be about the trial from a few days ago. Two companies had brought a copyright case to court—a case that his company had won.

Specifically, the parties had fought over the copyright for a program that Satoshi's company had been developing at the request of the Ministry of Defense. A program that, it was determined, Satoshi's older sister Remi Osako had leaked to the culprit: her husband, who was a higher-up from a rival company.

The problem for Satoshi was that the code had been stolen from his own dorm room. Satoshi had been out of the country on an overseas business trip at the time, but Remi had used her position as his older sister to convince the dorm manager to let her in. Satoshi had only learned the truth of the matter once he'd gotten back; when he'd booted up his computer to check over the program he'd been developing, he noticed an access log entry from a day he didn't remember accessing the program, found it suspicious, and reported it to his company. That was how the truth had come to light. He *had* put security controls on his files, of course, but somehow Remi had gotten past them and managed to copy the files for the program he was developing.

A few days later, another company announced the program as their own—though the contents made it clear that they were using the same files Satoshi had been developing. From there, it didn't take long to end up in court, where Satoshi's company won the case by proving the other program had copied their code right down to a line that caused a particular action to result in a particular bug. It was an obscure enough issue that nobody would usually notice, but it

involved a particular input consistently resulting in a system freeze—and that, combined with the other company’s public announcement of their “completed” program, had been enough to win the trial for Satoshi’s company.

Still, while the *trial* might have ended, that didn’t mean the same for the incident as a whole. A key accomplice in the crime had done her part by manipulating her relationship with Satoshi, the man in charge of the company’s development department. They couldn’t justify keeping him around in the wake of the incident.

And today, it seemed, it was time for his punishment to be handed down.

“I assume you know why you’re here, yes? Frankly, after everything you’ve done for the company, we’re reluctant to let you go. But even *we* can’t cover you for what happened here... Sorry.”

“No, don’t be. I’m aware that the blame here lies with my own family. I was already prepared for this.”

“I see. Still, for the sake of your reputation, I think it would be for the best if you resigned *voluntarily*...”

“I appreciate it. In fact, I’ve already finished writing my letter of resignation... Really, though, I’m sorry for all the bother.”

“I’m sure it hasn’t been any easier on you. Having to deal with a family like that...”

“Don’t get me started. Honestly, I’m thinking of cutting ties at this point...”

And so Satoshi quit the company where he’d worked for the past seven years. He didn’t remember how he got home after that. A few days later, though, he was packing up his belongings, getting ready to move out of the company dormitory for single men.

Before all this, he’d always felt like his job was a job worth doing. He’d intended to keep working as a programmer for his entire life. Now, though, factors outside of his control had destroyed those plans for the future.

Satoshi’s older sister Remi—the trigger for his retirement—had lived with him at one point. She’d shown up suddenly at his company dorm one day, saying

she'd gotten divorced, and barged her way in to shamelessly leech off him for three whole years. When he'd moved to a dormitory specifically for bachelors, he'd thought he'd finally managed to get her out of his life...but apparently, that wasn't enough. Now she'd managed to screw him over again, leaving him in *this* mess of a situation.

Remi was good at socializing. An expert at turning the people around her into her allies.

Satoshi had tried time and time again to drive her out, but every time, she'd started spreading nasty rumors, and his attempts had ended in failure. And when he finally *had* succeeded at driving her out, by way of a job transfer that had moved him to a different dorm, she'd leveraged their blood relationship to engage in corporate espionage at his expense. It was just about enough to make him give up on caring about life.

After the resignation, Satoshi's company was kind enough to let him live at the dorm for a few more days while he got himself together. He used the time to find his next place to live, ultimately deciding to use all the money he'd saved from his job so far to buy a detached house out in the countryside. Fortunately, there were also the rental apartment and house left by his late parents, so he at least had some income to help keep him afloat. Money aside, though, Satoshi had come to see life as something empty, pointless. He wanted nothing more than to live out his days quietly somewhere in the countryside.

Silently, he loaded his belongings into a mini truck in a parking lot, topped them with a green tarp, and tied it down with a rope to secure everything.

As he climbed into the seat of the truck and started the engine, he noticed someone standing there. The very *last* person he wanted to see right now. He made sure the truck's passenger door was locked before winding down the window by a crack.

"At this point? Really? What do you *want*, Remi?"

"Why so rude...? Oh, it doesn't matter. Anyway, let me live at your place for a while. My husband got fired, so I got another divorce."

"You reap what you sow. Why should I have to look after you?"

“A brother should always look after his sister, shouldn’t he? Come on, it’s fine. I know you get paid well enough.”

“*Unfortunately*, I don’t have the room in my budget to help you. I got fired. Thanks to a certain someone...”

“Fine. Just loan me some money, then. Five hundred thousand yen should do.”

“I don’t loan money to people who have no intention of paying it back. How about you actually go and do some work yourself?”

“Ugh. No way. Sounds like a pain. Anyway, if you don’t have any money, just give me the deed to an apartment or a condo or something. I’ll let you off the hook with that.”

“That’s already out of my hands. Besides, do you seriously not realize how much harm you’ve done to my company? They’d be able to sue me too if they wanted, you know? How about you try actually having a sliver of self-awareness for once?”

The longer Satoshi spent dealing with his haughty older sister, the more he was struggling to hide his irritation.

The stuff about not being able to transfer the apartment rights, and about possibly being sued, was a lie. He knew he had to say it, though, if he wanted to have any hope of getting his sister to leave him alone. Her greed knew no bounds.

“Just money, then. I’ll make do with that.”

“I don’t *have* any! And even if I *did*, I wouldn’t have the slightest intention of giving any of it to *you*!”

“What kind of man talks like that to his own sister?! You’re heartless!”

“We might be related by blood, but otherwise, I consider us strangers. Are you *really* going to try and pretend you’re a proper sister at this point?”

As you might expect, Satoshi was at his breaking point. Everything he’d bottled up was starting to burst out.

“Seriously, stop fucking with me! What kind of older sister relies on living off

her little brother's money?! You're an *adult*, dammit; how about you actually take care of your own damn self for once, you fucking skank!"

Now he was *past* his breaking point. His tone was getting harsher and harsher. He still had the sense to refrain from getting physical, though.

"Whatever you say, I bet you've got some money sitting around *somewhere*. What's the harm in giving me some?! Seriously, what a tight-ass..."

"I don't have any money to give to a criminal fucking parasite who can apparently only live by *leeching* off me and working with some son of a bitch to steal from my company! Just how much do you have to ruin my life before you're satisfied?!"

"Who are you calling a criminal?! I did nothing wrong! And society agrees with me!"

"Because you pushed all the blame onto your husband. You really do only care about yourself when everything's said and done, huh?"

"What's wrong with that? *Everyone* prioritizes themselves over other people. It's natural."

"Then I've got no reason to lend you any money, do I? Because I'd be the same. That's your own reasoning, right?"

Remi went silent.

Uninterested in continuing the discussion, Satoshi closed the kei truck's window and started to pull out of the parking lot as quickly as he could. If he'd had to talk to his haughty sister even a moment longer, he might've become a murderer.

And so Satoshi left behind everything he had lived for, and set off to live a self-sufficient lifestyle in the mountains, in a little countryside village with views of the Seto Inland Sea. He became essentially a shut-in—though he kept up with his online gaming, if nothing else. The digital world had become the only place where he could feel at ease.

He spent three years living out in the countryside. Over time, the kindness of the villagers helped to heal his broken heart, and he got accustomed to living a

self-sufficient life and helping out the other farmers who lived nearby. That was when *she* turned up again.

“Why on earth are you living like this? You’re a grown man! Do some proper work!”

“I *am* working, though. On the farm.” *And you’re the last person I want to hear that from!*

“Oh, I swear... Well, whatever. I’ll be living here for a while. Sure is *hot*, though, isn’t it? Hurry up and turn the AC on.”

“I don’t have one. How much do you think it costs to run an air conditioner? Besides, today’s still on the cooler side.”

“You’re kidding... Well, I’m hungry too. So order some delivery.”

“There’s nowhere that does delivery out here. You’ve seen where we are, haven’t you? We’re out in the middle of the mountains. It takes an hour to get to any stores, one way. Well, there *is* a hardware store, at least.”

Remi was lost for words.

“What do you even eat, then?”

“I’m pretty much self-sufficient. I get meat by going hunting with Mr. Tanaka, though. There have been more and more boars coming and damaging the fields lately; we have to cull them, or they eat up all sorts of vegetables and stop the farmers from earning a profit. Anyway, once we’ve hunted them, we preserve the meat by smoking it, or making sausages, or other things like that.”

“B-But what am I going to ea—”

“As if I’d have any food to spare for someone who doesn’t bother to work. What are you even saying?”

After a moment, she huffed. “Fine. Give me some money, then. I’ll rent an apartment or something somewhere.”

“Money? Do you really think I have any? What little I get, I use to pay the bills.”

It was the last thing Remi wanted to hear. She’d racked up some pretty hefty

debts lately, and she'd really just come to get money to pay them back—plus maybe mooch off Satoshi for a while again as a bonus, if she could.

“Wh-Why aren't you working, anyway? Shouldn't you be looking for another job somewhere by now?!”

“Are you trying to say farming's not a proper job? Besides, why should *you* care so much about what I do for work? It's only because of *a certain someone* that I don't want to work a regular company job anymore, after all.”

“Are you implying this is *my* fault?!”

“Who *else* would I be talking about? I wish you'd actually think about what you've done for once. You're acting like a spoiled kid.”

“What are you going to do about my debts?!”

“Why should I care? And why are you assuming I even have the money to help with that right now? I *don't*—because of the situation I'm in. Which I ended up in *because of you*. You sure say some stupid things... Anyway, why should *I* be the one to pay off *your* debts?”

Satoshi's eyes were like those of a man looking at a stranger, not his sister. No—at this point, they practically *were* strangers.

Remi was finally beginning to realize: the way she'd manipulated her position as Satoshi's sister had led him to completely cut ties with her.

“Come on! You're my *brother*! Helping out your sister is only natu—”

“A sister who's caused her brother no end of trouble, got him fired, and is now coming to extort him for more money. You've got a rotten personality; you know that, right? I seriously feel like killing you right about now.”

“Ugh, whatever. Just let me live here for a while, then.”

“I suppose I could...*if* you're willing to wake up at four in the morning to help me in the fields, that is. Oh—you'll need to collect the eggs from the chicken coop. And do some mowing, while you're at it. The grass grows so quickly here in summer, the whole property gets overrun by the stuff in no time if you leave it.”

“Wh-Why should I have to do stuff like that?!”

“From eight, you’ll need to do some more mowing on the farm and pick mandarins; you’ve got to earn your food, okay? It’s not like I have any spare money in my budget. Oh, that’s right, just a heads-up—there can be bears around sometimes, so watch out. Apart from that, let’s see... We’ll be helping out the neighbors with their own field work. And I’ll be burying *you* in the ground if you think of skipping—got it? We grow enough vegetables here to get by, but we’ll have to pickle some for winter, so it’s important not to take too many...”

This was nothing like what Remi had planned. Farmers out in the countryside started early in the morning, and they had close, open relationships with their neighbors. If she lived like a lazy slob here, word would spread in no time.

Furthermore, if her younger brother was out there helping other farmers with their work while she sat there watching TV and ordering takeout, it’d be dead obvious. Not that there were even any stores that *offered* takeout all the way out here.

She’d have to make her own food—and the same would go for the ingredients. Worse, the house Satoshi had bought was an old, traditional one, with most of the interior entirely visible from the outside. It didn’t even have any modern conveniences like air conditioning.

It was a real country lifestyle, where you had close relations with everyone in your neighborhood and saw them practically every day. This was nothing like settling down in a company dorm where you were free to do whatever you wanted. Even just going shopping required an hour’s travel each way, and getting to and from the nearest bus stop required traversing a big, steep hill; the village wasn’t famed for its public transport.

There were no convenience stores either, and nowhere to have fun. You needed to be a certain kind of person to live in a little countryside village like this, and Remi was *not* that kind of person.

Ultimately, unable to put up with the country lifestyle, Remi disappeared the next morning. Satoshi hadn’t seen her since.

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Satoshi—or rather, Zelos—opened his eyes and peered out the window at a

church cloaked in morning fog.

He was in a home filled with the smell of brand-new wood, not an old Japanese-style house out in the countryside.

“I guess that was...a dream? A pretty nasty one, at that... Why now, after all this time?”

As he gradually came to his senses, Zelos remembered that he was in another world, now, not on Earth.

Still rattled from his unpleasant dream, Zelos got up out of bed, picked up a cigarette from a table nearby, and lit it. His first smoke of the day tasted bitter.

*

“Wind Cutter.”

Zelos used an air spell to instantly cut all of the riceweed right from the roots.

He bundled up the cut yellow stalks, picked up a few of the bundles, and started carrying them to a certain place. He was harvesting the plant that would finally give him rice.

In this world, rice was essentially a weed. You didn’t have to grow it in flooded paddies; it just popped up by itself.

For now, though, nobody here saw it as a grain. Zelos was the only one who’d really thought of eating it. And as he went about harvesting it, he looked like a proper farmer, his straw hat and the towel wrapped around his neck suiting him well.

He fed the bundles of riceweed into his pedal-based threshing machine and started it up. The horizontal cylinder spun violently, the wire hoops fitted around the cylinder catching the rice husks and pulling them off.

The husks fell onto a sheet, which he’d laid out below in advance to make it easier to collect them.

“That looks *coooooo*!! Gimme a go too, Pops! I wanna try!♪”

“I suppose I don’t mind, but...it’ll be dangerous if you spin it too fast, okay? You could hurt your hands pretty bad.”

“I’ll be fine, Pops!”

“We ain’t weak enough to get hurt from somethin’ like this!”

“Anyway, Pops, you got any meat? Gimme some meat...c’mon...”

For some reason, the kids from the orphanage had come to help out.

“Is this really okay with you, Luceris? I’m sure you’ve got the field at the orphanage to tend to as well...”

“We’re dealing with the weeds every day, so it’s not a problem. But...”

“But what?”

“This type of weed here... Can you really eat it? I always thought it was just the same as any other type of weed...”

“You sure can! Though it *is* a little different from other plants.”

You could get rice from this plant—“riceweed,” as it was called here—but it didn’t work the same as rice plants on Earth. It *looked* similar, but it was a completely different plant.

Zelos glanced over and saw some of the kids clinging to the cylinder part of the pedal-based threshing machine as they spun it around at high speed. If they let go, the centrifugal force would send them flying. It seemed like this was some weird game they’d come up with on a whim—but it was quite the *dangerous* game.

“Hey! That’s dangerous! Stop it!”

Luceris, panicked, went to try and stop them. The cylinder was spinning so quickly, though; it took a while to stop.

When it finally *did* stop, the kids’ eyes were swimming, and they staggered from side to side, dizzy.

“Ange. Johnny. Laddie. Kai. Sit down—you’re in for a lecture.”

“‘Kaaay...”

And so began a harsh scolding.

But despite getting told off, the children had smiles on their faces.

Zelos simply watched Luceris scold the children out of the corner of his eye as he quietly bundled up the riceweed. But then a pause, and...

“Oh?”

As he picked up the riceweed, he felt like something was slightly *off* about the tips of them. And when he took one into his hand for a closer look, he noticed: the rice’s sizes were all inconsistent.

He held a few grains to use his Appraisal on them, and had an unexpected result flash into the back of his mind.

*

Rice (small grain)

Grains that become very dry when cooked; not particularly tasty. Best turned into rice crackers.

Rice (medium grain)

Tasty when cooked. The perfect rice, with a springy mouthfeel and just the right amount of sweetness. Gives off a subtle sweet aroma.

Rice (large grain)

Fairly sticky; suited to making things like ohagi and okowa. Could even turn into mochi if you pound it!

*

Am I... Am I going to need to sort these into different piles?

Zelos was realizing he’d need to make a winnower too.

A winnower was an agricultural tool that had been in wide use up until about the postwar period. It consisted of a wind turbine fitted to a drum component, which was spun to separate the chaff from the unpolished rice via wind power. The machine was also capable of separating the grains by size, to an extent, with the heavier ones coming to the front and the lightest ones flying out a hole

on the side, toward the back.

“I understand how they’re built, but making one’s going to be a pain, isn’t it? I’ll have to improve things a little too...”

Zelos just wasn’t feeling it today. He knew he’d have to do it sooner or later, but he decided to put off that particular task until tomorrow. For now, he felt like he had to get back to threshing the rice, or he’d never get it done.

“*Ugh*... My legs are numb...”

“Heh heh... I *bet* they are! That thing *gets* to ya, baby!”

“Why are you trying to talk all cool? Ugh, I can’t walk...”

“Meat... I wanna get paid in meat. Meat tasty enough to make my *mind* go numb...”

“I’m so sorry. I said we’d help you out, but the kids are just playing around...”

“Well, most kids their age *do* spend their time just playing. About the only ones working are the kids from farming families, right?”

Leaving aside the question of whether they were playing or helping, one thing *was* clear: their mannerisms were getting cruder and cruder with time. Still, at least it seemed like they were growing up healthy and confident.

“Anyway, the rice is really piling up here. Could I get some help carrying it?”

“I’ll do the threshing, so you go carry the riceweed with the children, Zelos.”

“You sure you don’t just wanna play with it, Sister?”

“Sister loves Pops’s thing? She wants to play with it?”

“Is Sister a ‘player’?”

“Is this that ‘naughty fun’ thing? Just make sure you don’t try and steal other people’s meat, Sister...”

The old town area was home to plenty of adults with questionable character, and it seemed like they were having quite the impact on the orphans’ behavior.

They probably didn’t understand the meaning of what they were saying, but they continued to speak like that anyway, just because they thought it was fun.

Still, it was a pretty bad look for Luceris, who was in charge of raising them.

“The people living around here aren’t all *bad* people, but, um, they tend to have, shall I say...rather foul mouths...”

“Well, a lot of the people here have been living in the slums for a long time, and plenty are vagrants and all that sort of thing. I can see how that’d have an impact on the kids.”

“I’ve tried what I can to correct their language, but they keep going and learning new weird ideas every day... I don’t know what to do about it!”

Trying to raise the orphans had Luceris at her wits’ end.

“Tell them off when you really have to tell them off; apart from that, it’s probably best not to force things too much. Kids learn best by reflecting on things themselves, after all.”

“But...won’t they end up as delinquents if I leave them like this? That’s what makes me worried...”

“That depends on how you define ‘delinquents,’ I suppose. Honestly, I think they’re fine as long as they’re not doing anything bad—and I think giving kids a bit of freedom is part of an adult’s job. Don’t you agree?”

Children usually acted in line with their own worldviews. In particular, when they did some stupid, dangerous thing, it was usually because they didn’t see it themselves as being dangerous, and ended up doing it because they were curious. Getting that information across to them was an adult’s job—but those adults needed to have patience. If you did nothing but place restrictions on curious youngsters like that, you could end up only making them *more* curious about what they were missing out on. And that would ultimately have the *opposite* effect—not only failing to stop them, but prompting them to dive headfirst into danger and find out what it was all about. Still, if you didn’t say *anything*, you wouldn’t be able to get them to realize that things were dangerous at all. It was a difficult balance...especially for the inexperienced Luceris, who’d been put in charge of looking after the children despite still being young herself.

“Leaving that aside... I wonder if it’d be quicker to collect all of the riceweed

together before doing the threshing? It's not like separating the chaff takes all that long."

"That sounds like a good idea. In that case, I'll help with bundling it all together. We can get the children to help us carry it."

Zelos called out to the children. "All right, kids, that's enough playing around. Come help us carry this, please. If we all work together, we'll finish much faster—and then I'll treat you to a nice meal."

"Yaaaay!"

"Wooo! I'm gettin' all fired up! Let's get this bastard *done*!"

"Luring us in with bait, huh, Pops?"

"I'm not complaining! I wanna eat that meat!"

The kids were true to their desires. After all, nobody appreciated a good meal like an orphan.

The work went smoothly after that, only stopping for the occasional break. And eventually, this world's very first rice harvest had been completed.

The threshed rice was put into Zelos's dryer for storage. Now all that was left was for him to make a winnower for separating it.

For now, though, the middle-aged reincarnator finally had his hands on some rice. The day when he'd be able to make himself that long-awaited sake was drawing close.

*

Around sunset, Zelos and the kids went to get themselves dinner at a diner in town.

Zelos was with the four children as their guardian, waiting together at a public square in town for Luceris to arrive.

The kids seemed to be having fun climbing their way up the side of a water fountain as they waited.

"Sorry to make you wait, Zelos."

"No, we haven't been waiting for that lo— Huh. Who's that with you? I

haven't seen her before."

"Her name's Kaede. We're looking after her at the orphanage."

For a moment, Zelos was shocked. After all, this girl—Kaede, apparently—had long ears. She was the first elf he'd seen after coming to this world. Furthermore, she was wearing what seemed to be a kimono and a red hakama, and she had a longsword slung over her back.

On the whole, then, she had a very *Japanese* look to her, seeming rather out of place on a street that otherwise looked like something out of medieval Europe. Her hair, meanwhile, fit neither vibe—long and almost translucent green in color. From what he'd read in a book at the ducal family's secondary mansion, where Creston lived, this appearance was characteristic of a high elf.

"Just to take a guess... Is the reason we haven't met before that she's a high elf, perhaps?"

"Yes. There are a lot of people out there who target high elves, so we've had to stop her from going outside in order to protect her. But you're here today, Zelos, so I thought I could bring her along."

"I see. Well, it's not like she can spend her whole life hiding away inside; and there probably *are* some valuable experiences she can only have by coming outside. I don't see any problem."

"Apparently she's a throwback. Her parents are mercenaries, and they only come back about once a month."

"So you're taking care of her in the meantime, then, is that it? Must be tough. Anyway, if there's anything you need, feel free to ask me. I should be able to chase off pretty much any thugs who come by."

Elves were valuable enough to just about drive any slave traders mad with desire. And *high* elves, in particular, sold for an absurd sum of money. If a slave trader made a good deal on one, they'd be able to coast by on the profits for the rest of their life. So however fit and healthy Kaede was, Luceris's caution was entirely valid, given how relentless some people might be in going after the girl.

That aside, though, this *particular* high elf seemed to have quite the unusual

aura to her.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Zelos. My name is Kaede Halfen. I may be naught but a fledgling novice, but I look forward to the opportunity to acquaint myself with you.”

“H-How...polite of you! My name’s Zelos; I’m just a humble mage. We’re neighbors, so feel free to call out to me any time.”

“Such modesty! Fortune must have favored me, that I am able to meet such an eminent mage as yourself. I humbly request permission to receive your guidance.”

“Guidance? With...the sword, you mean? Or magic?”

“The sword, of course! From what I have seen, you are quite the splendid swordsman. I have reason to believe you are a master not only of magic, but of the blade as well!”

The girl certainly had meticulous manners, that was for sure. And for an elf, she seemed very dedicated to the art of warfare.

Most of all, though, was her passion for the sword.

“I’m sorry, Zelos. She’s aiming to become a swordswoman, and apparently she’s already strong enough that regular adults don’t stand a chance against her. She’s being reckless, going around looking for strong opponents to challenge to combat...”

“She...*is* an elf, isn’t she?”

“She is, yes...”

“Does she really *need* an escort?”

“Well, if things go badly, her opponent could end up dead...”

As a species, elves tended to be intellectuals who favored the arts and shied away from fighting.

The majority of them saw wielding a sword as a barbaric act; instead, many of them ended up becoming mages. Kaede, however, was the complete opposite. It might be fair to call her a heretic.

Regardless, if she was talented enough to defeat adults, anyone who *did* come after her would very likely wind up dead with a blade through them. In other words, Zelos was a breakwater to make sure that Kaede couldn't cut down *anyone else*.

"My family were refugees who drifted ashore from the East; our homeland was ridden with wars so fierce that one needed to know the blade in order to live. Thus we feel no hesitation wielding the sword."

"Well, between the kimono and the hakama, I get that she has a kind of different culture from the elves around here. But...she's an interesting girl, isn't she?"

"I've been saying to people that she has a weak constitution. To try and explain why she doesn't go out, so that we don't draw attention. She's actually *incredibly* healthy; she spends every day training. The only thing is..."

"That she's a high elf, yes? You're probably right to be careful. Lying like that's perfectly fine if it's to keep everyone safe."

Zelos could see such an aura coming off Kaede that he had a hard time believing she was a child.

Even just standing there, she didn't seem to be leaving any openings. The average adult wouldn't even be able to scratch her, that much was clear.

In fact, judging by the aura and stance she was displaying in front of Zelos, it was almost like she was provoking him.

"You sure are a hot-blooded one, eh...?"

"My father taught me: 'Treat every moment as if you were on the battlefield.'"

"Just how hot-blooded is this *father* of yours, then? And—what, is he a samurai or something?"

"Indeed. My father is a samurai."

It seemed like Zelos had come across a very peculiar elf.

Again, most elves were either mages or spiritcallers. They weren't the sort of race to cut down their enemies with swords.

What few elven swordsmen there were tended to prefer narrow, light swords like rapiers, and rely entirely on technique. It was the first time Zelos had heard of an elf who sought to pair that technique with mental fortitude and brute strength.

Her manner of speaking was interesting too. She'd started out excessively polite, but the longer she talked, the more she was starting to revert to sounding like a stereotypical samurai. Zelos realized that little quirk, but he decided not to mention it. He figured it was best to not get involved.

"C'mon, Pops, let's go inside already! It's gonna get packed!"

"I'm hungry, Pops!"

"Yeah! Let us eat, Pops! I'm *starvin'*!"

"Time ta dig in! Dig in ta *meat*!"

"You kids never change, huh...?"

It sounded like the kids were starving. Left with no other option, Zelos and the others headed inside the diner.

This particular diner was part of an inn that faced a major road, so it stayed open until late at night.

As the group entered, they saw merchants and mercenaries sitting at the bar for an early dinner, and heard lively voices echoing throughout the establishment. Fortunately, though, it wasn't too crowded, so Zelos and the others were able to get some seats by the wall and open up their menus.

"I'll have the A combo!"

"I want the tuma soup with rye bread. And some fried gruber."

"You're gonna have fish? I'll get the B combo, then."

"Wild buffalo steak. For, uh...three people?"

"I shall order the C combo."

The kids were ordering whatever they wanted. Zelos was looking through his own menu too, but frankly, he didn't know what most of it was, so he decided to also order a relatively easy-to-understand set meal himself.

Luceris ordered the same cheap C combo meal as Kaede. It seemed like she was holding back—not that any of the kids seemed to be bothering to do the same.

Before long, their food was brought out—and the gang of little kids started tearing into it like wild animals.

It should go without saying that the sight made poor Luceris hang her head in embarrassment.

With the exception of Kaede, “table manners” was not a concept that even *occurred* to the children.

They were tough, hardy kids, living for each day as it came.

Chapter 12: The Old Guy Gets Involved

The orphans' ravenous eating was a sight to behold. The notion of table manners was entirely foreign to them; they were nothing but eating machines, shoveling down every bit of food within arms' reach. Or...no. They were eating with too much gusto to be called machines. They were probably better compared to a pack of hyenas swarming a corpse.

The sole exception was Kaede, who was going about her meal in complete silence. You could tell how elegant she was just from watching her eat.

The one thing that all the orphans had in common was that they weren't saying a word. Each of them was devoting everything they had to getting the food from the table to their bellies.

"They're kind of... What's the word? Feral?"

"Yes. It seems I've fallen short somehow with raising them... I'm so sorry."

Luceris was clearly embarrassed. She was curling herself up into a ball and hanging her head.

The four orphans' mindset could be boiled down to something like this: "When you can eat, eat with all you've got." Having lived in the alleyways before the orphanage took them in, they all had experience with hunger, and it had resulted in the habit of overeating whenever the opportunity presented itself. As the saying goes, you can't fight on an empty stomach—and it seemed like these orphans were aware of that on some instinctive level.

"What do you kids usually do with your time? I don't tend to see you often when I'm out working in my field."

"Mmh? Eeh ih ihiah awih."

"A oogs ih gihihah ahih."

The kids were trying to answer, but their cheeks were so stuffed full of food that they looked like hamsters or monkeys.

Feeling a little lost, Zelos looked for Luceris to help. She flashed him an awkward smile.

“They’ve been going out recently and cleaning around town for a charity the duke started up. They’re able to get a little bit of money from it—not a lot, but it’s something—and the more rubbish they collect, the more pocket money they earn, so they’re giving it their best.”

“Oh! That’s nice; it sounds like a good way of teaching them to be independent. I mean, your life’s virtually over if you get into the habit of just leeching off other people all the time.”

“Apparently, someone donated an enormous sum of money, and the duke used it to start up the charity. I heard they’ll also be offering money to anyone who exposes adults that try and manipulate the children to get money for themselves. Any adults that get caught will be enslaved, I heard.”

“Sounds like whoever’s set this up has put some thought into it. There are plenty of rotten adults out there who’d be happy to abuse charity and manipulate kids if it made them rich; it’s just good sense to have a punishment ready for people like that.”

The money for this project had come from Zelos himself, and he’d also given his input on all sorts of aspects of how it should work. By now, however, he’d completely forgotten about the whole thing. He knew all too well how greedy individuals could hound you for money if they found out you had more than you needed; perhaps this was some subconscious attempt to forget he’d even had the money in the first place, to try and make sure that nobody else like his sister would come after him.

It was like his mind instinctively refused to accept that he had access to a lot of money, like he was desperate to be left with no more than what he needed to get by. Depending on how you looked at it, that was...a noble pursuit, perhaps? But whatever the reason, he was constantly making sure that he never had much more money saved than the average person.

Even then, he had enough money to let the average person get by for a few years. And his was a frugal life; if he economized, he’d probably be able to get by for a full seven years or so. Not that he’d realized that himself.

“They’ve already arrested some people for that, apparently—and enslaved them, once the investigation was finished. I heard one of them was an alcoholic who was reported by his child and arrested by the guards. I can’t believe a parent would abandon their responsibility to their own child like that, though.”

“I’m going to guess it was some guy who screwed up at work, got left by his wife, and ended up desperate for money. Something like that, at least?”

“Still, I feel like it’s wrong for a child to sell out their own parent like that...”

“What if that parent had given up on raising their kid and started just abusing them? If the kid held a grudge against them because of that, I’d say the parent deserved it.”

While Luceris was worrying about proper parental relationships, Zelos went straight to assuming the worst of any situation.

The former’s pure heart was praiseworthy, especially for a member of the clergy. But when she’d never actually done anything for the family in question, it just sounded like empty platitudes. Zelos had the more pragmatic approach, assuming that tragedy was hiding around every corner.

That could make him look levelheaded at times. But really, he just took being a realist to an unhealthy extreme.

“So, have you kids given any thought to what you want to be in the future?”

“We’re gettin’ Kaede to teach us how to use swords! We’re all gonna get *strong*, use that to save up money, then spend every day just bein’ lazy!”

“I want to be a mercenary and go into dungeons. Then I’ll save some money, and...I think I want, I dunno, *ten* wives?”

“I’ll get rich quick and help out the people who’ve been good to me. I don’t wanna be a good-for-nothing with no future.”

“Get rich! Eat meat! I’ll work hard for lotsa meat.”

None of this was sounding very childlike.

The kids were planning to take some big risks...though they *were* also being true to their desires. In a sense, they showed a lot of strength and willpower.

“Some of that sounds a little mischievous, but that’s fine by me. Looks like you’re all growing up to be strong kids, eh?”

“Mm... It makes me worried, somehow. I feel like they’ll end up doing something outrageous someday...”

“I, myself, think I shall train ’til I am strong enough, then set out in search of the world’s strongest warriors to test my skills against in battles to the death. A weakling can say nothing of justice.”

“That sounds...dangerous. And, wait, did you say ‘*to the death*’?! ”

The samurai-like high elf girl had a disturbing smile—one that seemed remarkably unbefitting a child—as she imagined the violent path she planned to walk.

Her future, it seemed, would be full of blood. Something that would usually be unthinkable for a high elf.

In fact, it sounded closer to something you’d expect from a *dark* elf.

“Let me tell you my family motto: ‘Those who walk the hellbound path of steel must keep the samurai spirit alive within their blade.’ If I’m to train myself, there is no better option than real battle.”

“What kind of samurai even... Are you trying to become some kind of some battle-obsessed demon?”

“If doing so will let me hone my skills with the blade, then I could ask for nothing more. Blades are made for violence.”

“What you’re describing is no samurai. Just a butcher.”

“A butcher, you say? That too could be intriguing. A path that only heads straight ahead is no path worth traveling. One must have the courage to devote themselves to a detour at times.”

“That’s, uh...pretty metal. Surely you don’t want to end up on a wanted poster, though...”

At this point, though, the girl was firmly committed to the path of violence. There was nothing Zelos could say to her that would change her mind.

For a moment, Zelos wanted to go find the girl's parents and give them a piece of his mind about how they'd raised her. He was quick to change his mind, though, once he realized they'd probably challenge him to a fight to the death the moment he met them.

After all, it didn't sound like they were your average, respectable elves.

“Dead with nobody to recover the body’—that kind of life, eh...? But a kid shouldn't be saying the kind of thing you'd hear in an old samurai drama.”

Zelos was starting to picture the gruesome image of the young girl's lifeless body lying on some desolate battlefield, beaten by the elements. But just as he was thinking of giving her some harsh advice to try and stop her from acting rashly, he was interrupted by a voice he recognized.

“Heeeey! It's Mister!”

When he turned around, he saw Iris and the two other members of her mercenary party.

They were looking pretty beat-up, though...

“Jeanne?!” cried Luceris. “What's happened to you? You look so ragged!”

“We screwed up a job. A job against a real tough opponent. My brand-new sword took a beating too. It's already broken...”

“What were you fighting against, to end up with your sword broken like that?! You're not hurt, are you?”

“Nah, I'm good. Sorry for worrying you.”

It seemed like Luceris and Jeanne knew each other.

Zelos figured now wasn't the best time to butt in and ask about it, though. He decided to just watch and munch on some bread.

Still, those faint, maple-leaf-shaped bruises on the women's cheeks *did* make him a little curious...

“Why're you eating with Luceris, Mister? Since when'd the two of you even know each other?”

“They've been helping me out with my harvest, so I'm treating them to a meal

as thanks. That's all. Anyway, I'm curious too—what *were* you fighting against to end up with Jeanne's sword damaged so badly? Did you run into a dragon or something?"

"I guess you could say they were *kind of like* dragons... More of the 'hi-yah!' type of dragon, though."

"What, like kung fu? Were you out bounty hunting and ran into martial artists or something?"

"Not that. It was...wild cocos..."

Wild cocos *looked* like chickens, but they were proper monsters.

They didn't have the highest attack power, but they were smart and agile. They were physical fighters, mostly relying on kick attacks.

In the right circumstances, they could also evolve into cockatrices. Getting to that point required multiple level-ups, though—which wasn't always easy for creatures that were on the weaker end as far as monsters went.

Cocco eggs were delicious, and they were worth a lot, but the birds themselves were famous for their fiery disposition. Still, they weren't the sort of monsters that Iris's party should be losing to.

"They...*are* chickens, aren't they?"

"They are. But they're *ferocious* ones..."

Zelos had his doubts about whether any chicken that could break a long sword was really fit to be called a bird at all. But there was one thing he did know—and that was that he'd been wanting to keep some chickens. Though if he wanted to keep the kind of chickens that could beat up mercenaries this badly, he'd probably have to rework his plans a little...

"*Chickens*, though?!"

"Yes. They attack as a group, though. A *coordinated* group..."

"Okay, that *does* sound scary. Do you mean they swoop at you as a group? Like crows?"

"It's not that simple! Those are no birds... I mean, they *are* birds, but it's like

they're some kind of other creature altogether. A creature that follows the path of the dragon..."

"So you're saying they're some kind of kung fu birds? Well, I guess this *is* another world, so it wouldn't be impossible for that kind of thing to exist..."

"No, they're not kung fu birds. Those use nunchaku. And a three-section staff."

"So those are an actual thing, huh...?"

For some reason, Zelos had an image flash into the back of his mind of a panda trying his very hardest to learn kung fu.

Setting that aside, though, it seemed like the maple-leaf-shaped bruises on the women's cheeks were footprints from the wild cocos. There were clearly some strange creatures out there. This was a fantasy world, full of strange and marvelous things—and some of those things were absurd creatures that ignored the very laws of nature.

In this world, however, such things were the norm, and they were considered to be *within* the laws of nature. That was what made it so hard for Zelos to wrap his head around.

A certain kind of ape he'd had encounters with being a particularly memorable example...

"I just got it made, and it's *already* broken! It was made of mithril too..."

"I guess it was just badly made, then? Still, I can't imagine how a weapon heavy enough to carry on your back could break that easily."

"About that, Zelos... The wild coco used a weapon destruction move called Breaker Kick. It must have been some kind of subspecies. I'm sure of it."

From what Lena was saying, Zelos figured these birds must have some pretty impressive fighting skills.

For starters, you couldn't learn weapon destruction moves unless you'd obtained the Master Fighter job skill.

Later, if you managed to change to the Elite Fighter job, even just using the same moves as before would cause the force from the weapon destruction to

turn into a shock wave, making for abilities that not only broke your opponent's weapon but also dealt direct damage to them.

In *Swords & Sorceries*, having a low personal level meant your skill levels for your various abilities would be low as well. You could raise those skill levels a bit, but they'd be capped at a certain level. In *this* world, however, even a low-level creature could reach the higher skill levels as long as they continued to hone their skills. A low-level monster could still be dangerously strong if it had high-level ability skills.

In other words, the wild cocos in question must have trained hard. But Zelos just couldn't picture animals explicitly working to *train* their fighting skills.

"Are those things really wild animals? Something about it just sounds weird, however I try to come at it..."

"Apparently a former mercenary had been raising them. But then they got too much for the mercenary to handle, so we got a request to deal with them. It looks like they can understand human speech, because a human raised them. Then I guess they figured we were there to kill them, and they came at us with everything they had."

"Was the mercenary keeping them to sell their eggs? I'm not sure how that alone would make the things so good at fighting, though..."

"I think it was something like, they tend to fight back every time someone tries to collect their eggs. And here, that meant they ended up fighting a mercenary all the time, so it was kind of like training, and they kept getting stronger..."

It sounded like the birds had adjusted to their environment. Given a natural opportunity to train their fighting skills, they'd ultimately grown stronger than their owner.

A single bird alone still wasn't all that strong, but attacking in a group made them a menace.

"Guess I'll have to save up again. But I'll feel nervous using a backup sword until then..."

"Cheer up, Jeanne. Look at the bright side—if nothing else, you've come back

safe and sound.”

“But I’m a *mercenary*! How am I meant to do my job without a proper weapon?!”

Luceris was doing her best to calm down Jeanne, who was dejected over her broken sword.

A mercenary’s job was far from easy—and for these three particular mercenaries, who were all low-ranking, any excess expenses would have a significant impact on their day-to-day lives. Not to mention, weapons and armor inevitably cost money for their upkeep, repair, and so on, and that could be far more expensive than day-to-day expenses.

To have a new sword break right after you’d gotten it, though... It was hard to think of what to say at that point apart from, “Sorry to hear it.”

“Would you be able to do anything about it, Mister? She’s been like this ever since her sword broke...”

“Looks like she’s more sensitive of a girl than I’d thought. Well, would you like me to fix it myself? I’ve got some things to make it with, so I could even reforge it while I’m at it, if you want?”

“Really?! We don’t have anything to pay you with, though...”

“As long as you’ve got the broken sword and a magic stone, I’ll be able to make it and give it an attribute without a whole lot of effort. What do you want me to do, Jeanne?”

“*Mmm...* I’m happy you’re willing to fix it for free, but I feel kinda bad about it...”

Jeanne might have seemed like a strong-minded tomboy at first glance, but she was a timid woman. She could put on a confident front when she had her friends and acquaintances to back her up, but on the inside, she was faint of heart.

And at times like this, she was anxious enough that she felt guilty about relying on the goodwill of others.

“Anyway, I won’t be doing a lot—just a bit of a reforge—but would you mind

showing me this broken sword?”

“Fine by me, but...what’s *looking* at it gonna do for you?”

Zelos was a little curious about something, so he decided to use his Appraisal on the broken sword.

“The thing is, even a weapon destruction move should have only given it a bit of a nick or something, if it’s a brand-new sword. It shouldn’t have actually *broken*... Well, it’d be different if it kept taking hits like that to the same spot over and over, mind you.”

“Are you saying they cut corners on my sword? It should have *mithril* in it! I made sure to hand them the right materials.”

“That makes it even stranger, then. If there’s even just a little bit of mithril in there, it really should’ve lasted for a few hits, at least. Anyway, if I’m going to be fixing it, I’ll need to know just how good of a sword I’m meant to be working with.”

“Here...”

Jeanne reached to the scabbard on her back and drew a longsword that had been neatly snapped right down the middle.

Taking the broken sword in hand, Zelos started up his Appraisal, paying particularly close attention to the sword’s cross section and its center of gravity.

*

Scrap Iron Longsword

An inferior longsword forged with iron.

A weapon in name and looks alone, this sword includes no mithril, and has been poorly forged. Not even fit to be called third-rate.

Its durability is virtually zero, making it potentially crumble into pieces from even a single weapon destruction move. Not imbued with any special abilities.

The blacksmith cut every corner possible, leaving it unfit to be used as anything but decoration.

*

“Yeah... This sword doesn’t have any mithril in it at all. What workshop even made this? It’s a complete failure of a sword. You can’t even use this as a weapon. It’s *terrible*.”

“You’re kidding! I’m sure I handed over the mithril... Right, Iris?”

“Yeah. You paid them right too. And I remember the crafter saying, ‘I’ve used the mithril to make it nice and strong.’”

“So you got swindled, eh? This is sounding more and more like a scam. There’s no way you can use this thing as a weapon. If you tried using it in a *real* battle, you’d die.”

What was more, it was highly likely there were other victims of the blacksmith out there too.

“Anyway, let me ask again: what workshop made this?”

“Mm... I think it was the one right at the end of Artisan’s Road? Fuck! That old geezer scammed me, huh?!”

Suddenly, a chorus of voices rang out: “*What?!?*”

A bunch of mercenaries who’d been eating behind the group stood up all at once. They’d been interested in this all-female party, and it seemed like they’d been eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Hey, old guy—can you really use Appraisal?! Please, can you give our weapons a look too?!”

“Take a look for us, please! We’ve got mithril swords too, but after hearing all that, I’m kind of worried now...”

“My shield and my armor too! I won’t be able to get my mind off what could happen, if things go bad... I’m begging you!”

“Well, I guess I don’t mind...”

As Zelos looked into the other mercenaries' pieces of gear, it became clear that they too were not the sort of swords and armor that a proper blacksmith with a proper workshop would make. They were duds, made by an amateur who had, at most, dabbled a little in smithing. What was more, none of the weapons or armor he appraised had any mithril in them, and none of them would do a whole lot to keep you safe.

It was starting to seem like someone had just taken the rare metals the mercenaries had worked so hard to gather, then just sold them without actually including them in the gear the mercenaries had ordered.

"So that geezer thinks he can just fuck with us like that, huh?!"

"I'll kill the prick!"

"Killing him can come later. First, we've gotta make him regret being born in the first place..."

"Heh heh heh... Yeah, we've gotta give him plenty of *punishment*..."

Fueled by rage, the mercenaries stormed out of the diner.

They paid for their meals first, at least. But beyond that, they'd sprung up out of their seats and made a beeline for the exit, making no effort to hide their murderous intent.

"You should probably call some guards. If things turn south, the smith who made those things could be killed soon..."

"You're right. I'll go call some now."

"Thanks, Lena. I'll head to the weapon shop first myself. I've gotta at least get one hit on the guy, or I won't feel satisfied."

"I'd be worried if I let you go by yourself, Jeanne. I'll go with you. I mean, you'll need *someone* to go wait around the back and make sure he can't escape!"

Tired as they were, the three young women made their way outside in a hurry.

"They've got it tough, huh...?"

“Are you not going to go with them, Zelos?”

“Me? Why?”

“This blacksmith might have committed a crime, but still... If things go badly here, he could be *killed*. If there’s nobody there with a level head to stop it, someone might end up doing something they can’t come back from. And on the off chance that *Jeanne* ends up killing a person...”

In the face of Luceris’s concern for Jeanne and the others, Zelos could hardly bring himself to say, *I’d rather not. It sounds like a pain*. And while Jeanne had already killed someone during her time as a mercenary, she probably hadn’t told Luceris about that. Or, perhaps it was less “hadn’t,” and more that she simply *couldn’t* bring herself to tell her friend what she’d done.

Reluctantly, sighing, Zelos rose from his seat.

“I’ll pay the bill. Feel free to take your time finishing your meal.”

With that, Zelos went to the counter.

Once he’d finished paying, he summoned a familiar and set it loose to track down Iris and the others.

Still...wild cocos, eh? Hmm. Maybe I’ll have to try and keep some myself...

Zelos was less interested in some blacksmith he didn’t know, and more interested in getting some wild cocos that could lay him tasty eggs.

He headed off to the weapon shop in question, wondering what these eggs might taste like.

*

After pursuing Iris and Jeanne and the others for a while, Zelos arrived at Artisan’s Road.

Lining both sides of the cobblestone street were all sorts of workshop-cum-stores, selling a wide range of handicrafts, tableware, weapons, armor, and more. From time to time, Zelos could sense an odd smell coming from somewhere, though he figured it was probably just something to do with the leather workshops.

His familiar helping him to get a view of the terrain, he circled around from the back as he chased after Iris and the others.

“There you are. Hopefully you haven’t killed the blacksmith yet?”

“No, I’m not gonna *kill* him! I’m not *that* violent!”

“Uh, Mister, we don’t even kill bandits, you know...?”

“Someday, you’ll be in a situation where you’ll *have* to kill someone. Life comes cheap here.”

It seemed like Iris was still hesitant to kill anyone.

That was a *good* thing, as a human. But in a world where life came cheap, it went without saying that she’d probably have to be ready to kill someday—especially since she was a mercenary. Mercenaries took on things like escort requests, and there was the risk that letting any attacking bandits escape alive could lead them to hold a grudge and come back for revenge. Still, perhaps it was unreasonable to expect a middle schooler to take human lives without a care...

Even if a mercenary specialized in fighting against monsters, bandits would have no such qualms about targeting *them*. And if the young women hesitated when that time came, they’d be the ones who wound up dead. In fact, two of them had just recently experienced capture by bandits, and Zelos had told them they should at least be ready to take action if something similar happened again.

“Just up ahead is the back of the workshop. It’s...quite a narrow alley, though, isn’t it?”

“This area’s not just unpopular; it’s the delivery entrance for the crafters too. Apparently there’s just no need to make it wider. Still, I heard this blacksmith was meant to have a good reputation...”

“Did you order there because you heard those rumors, perhaps? Not because it was your regular shop?”

“We don’t really have a home base, so we don’t *have* a regular shop. We could be in a different city tomorrow, after all.”

“In that case, whoever spread the rumors could be their accomplice. Maybe they were trying to scam rare metals from mercenaries who aren’t familiar with the area.”

Rare metals like mithril could sell for a high price. A piece of mithril about the size of a palm would be enough to let a peasant live for a few years without working, if they were frugal enough. Even just little fragments could add up to a decent weight—and sell for quite the price—if you got enough of them. What was more, these kinds of rare metals could only be mined in remote areas teeming with monsters, so there could be some significant disparities between the prices in each country.

“I imagine you could make a pretty good profit if you took ore from here and sold it in some other country. I wonder if there’s some kind of shady organization behind all this?”

“I’m more interested in what’s happened to my mithril. I got it weighed at the mercenaries’ guild, at least, so if we can catch the scammer, I’ve got a decent chance of getting it back.”

“Wait—you’re more worried about getting your mithril back than about being scammed?”

Iris was a little taken aback by Jeanne’s priorities.

“Of course I am. A mercenary’s weapon is her lifeline. A good weapon can be the difference between life and death!”

“It *does* also mean you risk having some nasty riffraff set their sights on you, though. After all, if you want a good weapon, stealing one’s much cheaper than making one. Though that’s only if you can beat its owner, I suppose.”

Zelos was only talking common sense, but Jeanne and Iris were looking back at him with wide eyes.

Still, their expressions didn’t faze Zelos, who just went about picking up some pebbles from the alley.

“Wh-What makes you say something like that, Mister?”

“Yeah. How would anyone even know if you had any mithril in your weapon?”

And who'd go around *telling* people about it?"

"You can tell just from how something looks. It changes how the sword reflects light, you see. Even if someone just *happened* to find out you had a weapon like that, you could end up with some rather unsavory sorts setting their sights on you. And especially as a woman, you could probably get people going after you for another reason too..."

Morals were only upheld in cities and villages. Take one step outside, and you were back in the wild, where the only law enforced was survival of the fittest.

For someone living in a world like that, Iris was nowhere near careful enough. Even Jeanne was probably too good-natured for her own sake.

"I feel like you should probably rethink some things, Iris. This isn't a game. It's a savage world—and if you die, it's all over."

"Ngh... Still, though, *killing* someone's a bit..."

"I'm not telling you to *enjoy* killing people. Just to keep it on the table as an option, if it's something you need to do to survive. What's important is to be prepared for it. I've killed some bandits myself, remember."

"But monsters and people are different! Sure, I might get angry enough to want to hit people sometimes, but it's not like I want to *kill* them..."

"It's strange to hear that coming from someone who just about became a slave. Besides, aren't monsters living beings too? Just like humans, they live their lives and kill each other in a fight to survive. Anyway, there's no need to hesitate to kill people who have no morals of their own. They're no different from animals, in that sense. Don't hold back."

This was an eat-or-be-eaten world, where hesitation would only get you killed.

Zelos's experience of getting dropped into the Far-Flung Green Depths had forced him to learn that harsh reality, whether he'd wanted to or not. By now, he was fully prepared to kill anything or anyone he classed as an enemy, even if they were human. It was making Iris a little scared of him. Even in a world like this, which wasn't quite as civilized as Earth, having morals was by no means a bad thing. But there were undeniably a lot of people out there who were

lacking those morals themselves. It might not have seemed like it, but this was Zelos's way of looking out for Iris.

"Hmm? It seems like something's already started over there."

The mercenaries who'd asked Zelos for help earlier were out the front, now, their angry voices echoing off the walls.

And it sounded like people were already right in the middle of an argument inside the workshop.

"What the hell is *this*?! It's a dud, isn't it?! Give us back our money, you lousy excuse for a blacksmith!"

"It *looks* nice enough, sure, but it's damn useless as a weapon—you know that, yeah?!"

"Don't tell me you started up this whole sham just to steal people's mithril, huh?"

"So? Give us some fucking *answers*, you shithead!"

"That can't be true! You're all just being fussy over little faults! Where's the evidence I've done anything bad?!"

It sounded like the owner of the workshop had no intention of admitting any wrongdoing. He was even getting angry himself, as if *he* was the victim in all this.

"Someone with Appraisal told us! That's the best proof you can get, isn't it?"

"You screwed us over. I hope you're ready to pay the price..."

"I'm telling you, I want real *proof*!"

This was going nowhere. The man was technically right; unless you melted down the swords the mercenaries had been using, there was no way of actually proving that they didn't have any mithril in them. The mercenaries could *say* that someone had appraised their items, but at the end of the day, words were only words. They weren't the same as concrete proof.

The only way of actually figuring out the contents of a given metal was to melt it down and analyze the results. Though of course, if they went to do that,

the man would inevitably run away.

“Fine, then—if you insist so much, let’s call some guards. We’ll ask ‘em to melt down this sword here—and if there’s no mithril in it, you’re guilty.”

“Right. I’ll call ‘em, then. Don’t let this shitbag escape, all right?”

“There might be some mithril left inside the workshop. We might be able to get the guards to retrieve it for us once they’re here too.”

“*Grr...* Do what you want. But if there’s no mithril inside, I’m expecting you all to take responsibility for this, all right?!”

The man was speaking as if the building were free of mithril. But just as that discussion was going on, the back door where Zelos and the others were lying in wait swung open, and four thuggish-looking men came out carrying two wooden crates.

“*A-ha!* So you *were* meaning to carry it out through the back! There’s mithril in those boxes, isn’t there?! How stupid do you think we mercenaries are?”

Iris seemed to be having fun playing the prosecutor, a triumphant look on her face.

“Did you think we’d just let you fucking frauds run?! Give me back my mithril!”

“Shit. So they had some out the back too. No helping it... Boys!”

“Right!”

The men suddenly drew knives and set off into a run. However...

TING!

You could hear the sound of metal being flicked away, and one of the men dropped his knife.

Then the same sound, again, as a second man’s knife was knocked out of his hands.

“Hu— Wh-What?!”

“What do you mean, ‘what’? It’s just a pebble. I flicked it with the Snap Fingers ability. Haven’t you heard of it?”

“You bastard... You’re a fighter, huh?”

“No, no. Just your average mage.”

“You liar! What kind of mage is out there using fighting skills like that?!”

“Me. Right here.”

A long silence ensued.

“Seriously...?”

“Snap Fingers is...one of the real basic abilities, ain’t it? My knife got knocked out of my hands by something super strong, though...”

“Shit. This guy’s a real pro...”

“If that thing hits us in the head, we’re done for! We ain’t getting paid much anyway... Do we just surrender?”

“Personally, I’m not fussed whatever you choose. Just hurry up and decide.”

The thugs exchanged glances.

In front of them were a strange mage, a little girl, and a tough-looking beauty.

If it were just the two women here, it’d be one thing. But they didn’t feel like they stood a chance against that shady mage.

“Y-You lot! Why are you still here?!”

“Crap! It’s the old shithead who employed us!”

“Who are you calling an ‘old shithead’?! Hurry up and make the delivery!”

A middle-aged man looking in the prime of his life had emerged from the rear entrance, and he was angry to see the thugs still there.

His balding head only helped make him look like the perfect stereotype of a greedy middle-aged man.

“Same as you, man—we got no way out! We ain’t getting through here carrying this stuff!”

“Hah?”

The balding middle-aged man looked at Zelos and the others, and clicked his

tongue.

“Hey. You lot. Can you get out of the way? That box is full of stuff we’ve gotta bring to the duke. He ain’t gonna let you off easy if he finds out you’ve been getting in the way of his business.”

“Oh—a delivery for the duke? Would you like me to take it to him, then? You’re in luck—he’s an acquaintance of mine. It won’t even cost you anything!”

“Don’t be stupid. I can’t see why the duke’d ever have anything to do with some shady old mage like you!”

“Be that as it may, we *are* acquaintances, though... If you’d like, I could even ask old Creston, the former duke, to confirm it for you? I’ll show you the way—he’s right nearby.”

The moment the name of the Mage of Purgatory came up, the balding man’s face paled.

He hadn’t expected to run into someone who knew the former duke well enough to refer to him as “old Creston.”

The man was starting to realize he’d put his foot in his mouth.

“I suppose you thought you’d be able to get away scot-free if you said it was a request from the duke... Looks like you didn’t think things through, though, eh? Even just abusing the duke’s name like that is a crime, you know? Anyway, you messed up. Just throwing out a lie like that on the spot without any clue of who the other person might know can leave you in a real pickle.”

“I-I ain’t lyin’! This was for that, uh, Solistia Trading...”

“Do you want me to deliver it for you, then? As I said, I know them. I’ll give His Grace your regards.”

If this shady-looking mage really *were* an acquaintance of the duke, it’d look suspicious to turn Zelos down here.

At the same time, there was no way this fraudulent blacksmith was going to hand over the cargo. He didn’t know when to give up.

“I-It’s all magic tools! Real dangerous ones! You wouldn’t wanna handle them unless you got a lotta experience dealing with that sorta thing.”

“Rest assured. I make hundreds of dangerous magic tools just in my spare time; I’m perfectly used to handling them. So please, leave it to me. No need to hold back.”

“Ah... Yeah, you *do* look like the sort to do that kinda thing, Mister. I can see you making, like, *suuuper* dangerous ones...”

“I *have* actually made them before, you know? Though, well, one ended up blowing up a few hundred allies in a raid... That sure was a day to remember. One moment, that guild master who always annoyed me was alive; the next, *poof*, gone. Up there with the angels. It *did* leave me with a bit of a bad reputation, though, mind you...”

“So *that* was what got you that nickname, huh? Makes sense. Anyway, back to the topic—why would a blacksmith have magic tools? That sounds kinda sus.”

Iris had an oddly easy time accepting the origin of Zelos’s “Destroyer” nickname, now that she’d heard it. He *did* seem like the kind of person who’d make crazy magic tools one after another—in fact, he had hazardous goods like that sealed away in his inventory at this very moment. Though of course, they weren’t the kinds of “hazardous goods” that he had any idea of how to *use*...

It felt like the blacksmith was digging himself into a deeper and deeper hole with every word. He was starting to get frustrated.

Zelos, though, seemed to have been waiting for just that. He fired off another Snap Fingers—this time, toward the crates.

SMASH!

The crates shattered with an impressive noise, scattering countless bits of ore across the alleyway with great force.

And some of that ore looked particularly...*white*.

“Mithril ore, huh? So, where were you intending to take all this ore you scammed from people?”

“You bastard... Look what you’ve done! They’re gonna *kill* me!”

“Not my problem. Blame yourself for screwing up. Well...whoever you blame,

I imagine you're headed to jail either way."

The balding man had no way out at this point. Even if he *did* manage to make a getaway, his employer was never going to forgive him. He knew he'd be dealt with before he could let any inconvenient information slip.

Backed up against a wall both literally and figuratively, the man suddenly picked up a knife from the ground and dashed toward Zelos.

"OUTTA MY WAY!"

With a light touch, Zelos grabbed the arm that was coming at him with the knife. Using the man's momentum, he executed a wraparound judo throw, hauling the man over his shoulder and using his hips as springs to hurl him at the ground. It was a perfect one-armed shoulder throw, and the man's back was violently slammed against the cobblestone road.

His body was numb now, unable to move—and without delay, Zelos followed up with a palm strike to his solar plexus. The man fainted.

"Those guards sure are taking their time, huh...?"

Ignoring the unconscious blacksmith, Zelos held a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

White smoke wafted through the narrow back alley, slowly becoming one with the breeze.

"Uh... Why was I even here, again?"

"To get your mithril back, wasn't it, Jeanne? Well, I guess it's kinda sad that you didn't get a chance to do anything, but that's just Mister's fault for being too strong. Don't let it get you down!"

"By the way, Iris, would you be able to tell me where those wild coccos you failed at subjugating were?"

"Are you going to go and try to beat them, Mister? They're crazy strong!"

"No, no, I was just thinking it might be nice to keep them. People *do* say they lay some tasty eggs."

Now that Zelos finally had his hands on some rice, his next goal was to get

some decent eggs.

It'd still be a while until he could finish making sake, so for now, he'd try to finish getting everything he needed for tamago kake gohan.

He was still forgetting, though, that eggs and rice alone weren't enough to make tamago kake gohan. He'd need some soy sauce too...

*

Shortly thereafter, the balding blacksmith was arrested and taken away by the guards that Lena had called.

The thugs, meanwhile, were only carriers who'd been doing it for some money. They'd had no idea what was in the crates they were carrying, so they were released within a few days. From the investigation, it seemed like they'd known there was probably something shady going on, but they'd needed the money to get by. The balding man, it was determined, was from the outer branch of some shady underground organization, and was being used to swindle mithril from people to raise funds for the group.

Then, just a few days later, another person was caught—this one from an underworld broker—leading to a prompt purge of anyone related from the city of Santor. It had apparently been a surprisingly large-scale operation, and suddenly rooting it out from the bustling trade city led to considerable improvement in Santor's public order.

That also kicked off a simultaneous investigation across various regions, with bases in other cities being investigated and cutting off most of the organization's sources of funding. It was a big blow to the criminal organization in charge. The middle-aged mage and his friends, who'd set it all off, were given some money as a reward, lining their pockets well enough that they wouldn't have to worry about their living expenses anytime soon.

Zelos's response to finding out, though, was just to nonchalantly puff on another cigarette.

Chapter 13: The Old Guy Makes a Sword

The day after the incident with the blacksmith, Zelos woke up early and got straight to transmuting the parts for some winnowers.

With a straw hat on his head, a towel around his neck, and a light brown vest paired with dark green pants, he looked every part the proper farmer.

In their simplest form, winnowers allowed you to separate rice from chaff. But Zelos was also improving on the design so that he'd have a winnower capable of sorting rice into different types as well.

Rice grains in this world had different properties depending on their size, so you *had* to sort them; this kind of feature would be essential. Zelos would start by adding the rice to a container fitted to the top of the machine. From there, it would fall down onto a slope, where wind power would be used to separate the chaff from the rice and sort the grains by size. It was his first time making a machine like this, though.

Unlike his rice dryer, a winnower required intricate parts that were a bit of a pain to make, so he was having a tough time. He didn't have bolts or anything to fix the different parts in place, so he had to build the machine using parts that interlocked with each other, then add metal fixtures to secure the joints. But it was sturdy enough, at least.

To start with, he'd built a design that generated wind using hand crank parts. Figuring that'd get to be a pain sooner or later, though, he'd also made a separate type, which drew power from a magic stone to spin blades to generate airflow. At this point, he had three different prototypes, and he intended to compare them against each other and see which worked best. One of these was the old-fashioned, hand crank design, while the other two were variants of the automated design. He'd made two of the latter to test things out and see how adjusting the force of the wind affected the result, reasoning that if either was a failure, he could just take it apart and turn the iron back into ingots.

His base design was simple enough and fairly easy to assemble, so it hadn't

taken him too long to put all three together.

And now, the three winnowers, each with a slightly different appearance, were sitting in a line.

They were already just about complete. Zelos was still tweaking them to improve them a bit, but at the end of the day, all they needed to do was generate some wind, so surely they'd be fine. After all, what was the worst that could happen? Still, he'd been feeling a little uneasy ever since he'd fitted the magic stones, and he couldn't quite put his finger on why.

"I just...*feel* like this is going to fail. I don't know why, though. I've checked over the formulas so many times by now..."

Zelos was caught up in his worries. He'd finished the prototypes, for what it was worth, but he had no way of knowing whether they'd work until he actually tested them out. It didn't seem like they'd explode or anything, at least, but something still had him anxious.

"Good morning, Zelos."

"Oh—Luceris! Good morning."

Tagging along behind Luceris was the three-woman mercenary party of Jeanne, Lena, and Iris.

They were probably here to get Jeanne's sword repaired, as Zelos had promised to do yesterday.

"We're here, Mister~!♪"

"Huh. Never woulda guessed there was a house like this just behind the church. That's a pretty damn big...garden? No, I guess it's more of a *field*..."

"Morning, Zelos. Really, though, this place must have sprung up almost overnight! Hamber Construction sure is impressive..."

Hamber Construction was famous here in Santor—for more reasons than one.

Its crew was known by all sorts of nicknames: "the Mad Builders," "the Fussy Boneheads," "the Brawling Engineers," "the Dancing Laborers." They were famous for the blistering speed of their construction work, for the skills that made that possible, and for being singing, dancing *entertainers* on the job. They

lacked common sense, and they'd do anything that came to mind if it made their work fun. They also had a habit of incorporating new methods and technologies regardless of the cost, and they never stopped honing their dancing and construction skills, day and night.

What was more, their working habits were spreading to other companies too, and any other crafters they worked with ended up their buddies before the job was done. The Dancing Laborers were starting to make a name for themselves nationwide.

"At this rate, I wonder if even the farmers will end up dancing sooner or later..."

"What are you talking about?"

Iris sent a quizzical look at Zelos. But the middle-aged man just continued to stare off into the sky, his head in the clouds.

Picturing a world where every last crafter and merchant sang and danced on the job, Zelos felt a bit of a chill run down his spine. Sure, perhaps there was something idyllic about the idea of a city where everyone spent every day partying it up, like something straight out of a musical. But at the same time, the picture of a singing, dancing fantasy world, like some sort of anime, just felt off—*wrong*, somehow—to Zelos.

"So you're here to have me fix your sword, right? Just give me a moment first, please. I'm about to start a test run."

"What's *this*?"

"Is this some kind of farming machine you've made, Mister?"

"I've never seen anything *like* this before. What are you hoping to use it for?"

All three of the mercenaries were confused by the machines in Zelos's field. But rather than bothering to explain anything, Zelos just switched one of them on.

Powered by a wind magic formula, the wind turbine began to spin—*chugga, chugga, chugga-chugga-chugga*—creating airflow behind the winnower.

For a moment, it looked like a success. Until, that was, the wind began to get

stronger and stronger. The winnower started to propel itself forward. Slowly at first, but then faster, and faster again. It seemed like Zelos's bad premonition had been justified. In a panic, he reached out and hit the button to turn the machine off.

"Hm? I've hit the off button, but it's still going..."

Zelos wrapped around to the front of the machine to stop it from advancing any farther. But it continued to pick up more and more speed, and eventually, he lost his balance. Before long, the machine achieved takeoff. The entire winnower began to rise from the ground, gradually soaring higher and higher into the sky.

It was the world's first invention of flying farming equipment.

An awkward silence ensued.

"Uh... Mister? It flew away."

"Hmm... Prototype 01: issues with wind power modulation due to flaw in wind pressure control formula. May require revision..."

Having escaped the confines of gravity, the winnower was soaring through the wide open sky. It was free.

Still, this was only one of Zelos's three prototype winnowers. This Prototype 01 was an automated version of a regular winnower design, but the blades had spun too quickly, and there had been a flaw in the formula used for start-up. It was making Zelos curious about how the *other* automated one had turned out.

"Prototype 02, you're up."

"W-Wait a minute! Your *first* machine just *flew*! Isn't this where you'd usually call off the test?!"

But right as Luceris was trying to stop Zelos, he hit the switch.

Prototype 02's blade was a screw propeller, housed not in a drum but in a cylinder. This one let out a loud, higher-pitched whirring noise as it started up.

The cylinder served to concentrate the air pressure into a smaller area—giving it higher air pressure than Prototype 01.

With a mighty *thump!*, the winnower started to accelerate with incredible speed. It zoomed straight ahead, destroyed the wall around Zelos's plot of land, then took to the skies, where it could be seen snaking around for a while before disappearing beyond the horizon.

And with that, Zelos had achieved a *second* world's first for the day. He'd just broken the sound barrier.

"Well... Okay, then. So the cylindrical one's a little crazy. I guess it's back to the drawing board..."

In his initial blueprint, Zelos had just wanted to generate about as much wind as your average electric fan. But the mana stored in the magic stones had made the prototypes far more effective than he'd intended; the turbines inside had ended up spinning at incredible speed, generating far more propulsion than he'd been expecting.

It was sort of like how connecting more batteries to a motor would increase the turbine's revolutions per minute. And the winnowers, of course, hadn't been fastened to the ground, so all that force had started to move them forward.

It certainly wasn't helped by the fact that Zelos had loaded far too high a density of mana inside the magic stones.

In short, it was something like a broken electric fan beginning a domino effect that made it spin faster and faster before ultimately propelling itself from the force.

Well, this is a bit of a pickle. I used the smallest magic stones I could, but...no, does this mean I can use something even smaller, I wonder? Still, if they're too small, engraving the magic formulas is going to turn into a real intricate job. Even if I can do something about the formula issue by using a spellseal crystal, I don't think I'll be able to control it unless I make a component to expand the circuit...

"Hang on—sorry to interrupt you while you're thinking about stuff, but aren't these things *dangerous*? The hell have you made here, geezer?!"

"Yeah, those...aren't really farming tools, are they? I mean, they *flew*..."

“Don’t tell me you were actually trying to make a rocket, Mister?”

Even if Zelos wanted to retrieve the winnowers that had flown off into the distance, he didn’t know where they’d gone. Especially given that one of them had zipped away at supersonic speed.

He had no choice but to give up on retrieving them. But once they ran out of mana, gravity would do its thing and bring them crashing back down to earth.

What goes up must come down.

“Um... Zelos? If one of those comes falling down and hits a *person*...”

“It’d be a disaster, yes. Let’s just hope it falls in the middle of nowhere...”

The mysterious farming equipment had, for now, escaped the clutches of gravity and flown freely through the sky, disappearing far into the distance.

All Zelos could do now was offer a repeating prayer in his heart: *Please let them come crashing down in some other country...*

Luceris was pallid and praying to the gods, desperately hoping that there would be no casualties. Zelos was the one who’d made the machines, but for some reason, *she* was feeling incredibly guilty about it too.

The remaining Prototype 03, by the way, was the initial hand crank version Zelos had made, so there was no danger of a similar domino effect with that one. Everything on that one was manual apart from the separation of the rice, though, so it was a lot bigger than the other two prototypes.

And because of that, he’d have to go through the bother of taking it all apart and then reassembling it in his storage room.

Still, when you were trying to make machines for convenience, prototypes were a must. Revising and optimizing the design to make it smaller would come later—and it’d involve a great deal of effort and time.

Regardless, Zelos quietly decided that he would have to go back and take another long think about improving on his designs.

*

“All right, then. About Jeanne’s sword...”

“Are you just gonna pretend the whole ‘flying farming machines’ thing didn’t happen, Mister?”

“Well, if I can’t retrieve them, I’m not sure worrying about it’s going to help too much. With how fast they flew off, I don’t have any way of knowing *where* they could’ve landed. Especially since one of them went faster than the speed of sound... Unless, what—are you suggesting that you’ll go and retrieve them for me yourself?”

“U-Ugh! No way. Even if I could fly, there’s no way I’m catching up to a supersonic machine...”

Even Zelos’s flight magic wasn’t able to go as fast as a fighter jet.

Plus, the human body would struggle to withstand speeds fast enough to break the sound barrier.

“By the way, I guess it’ll be fine, but...can you seriously make swords, old guy? You might be a mage, but that doesn’t mean you can do everything a smith can, does it?”

“You make a very good point, Jeanne, but I’m actually quite the crafter too. I’ve made plenty of swords and other gear before, and even magic tools. Though, well, when I take on requests, I always just use the materials that get brought to me.”

“I’m imagining you could probably make potions and other wonder drugs too, right? I get the feeling that pretty much anything goes, with you...”

“Sure can. I usually don’t bother, though. They’re a pain to make. Some ingredients you can only get by taking down some pretty nasty monsters, so I only make enough to keep *myself* supplied. Whenever I have leftovers, I go straight to sell them on the street corner.”

Zelos was entirely aware of how absurdly overpowered he was. If he wanted to, he could make as many powerful weapons as he set his sights on. But he didn’t actually want to see those sorts of weapons getting used in wars or anything.

“Anyway, I make my fair share of weapons. It doesn’t take that long if you use transmutation, after all.”

“Now that I’ve already been tricked once, I kinda feel iffy about just trusting what someone says again... You *sure* you can make something decent?”

“You’re just after a basic sword with a bit of mithril in it, right? It should be easy enough. The real question is, what sort of attribute do you want me to give it? I can make it a magic sword or give it resistance to undead, or all sorts of other things, so choose whatever you’d like.”

Before he’d even finished speaking, Zelos was deploying a transmutation sigil. He was already prepared to make a sword at a moment’s notice.

Magic stones were tougher than diamonds, but if you just filled them with mana without giving them an attribute, they turned soft.

“Oh, and what do you want for the sword’s shape? Just a regular sword? Or something that stands out from the pack a little more, so to speak?”

“Wait—what do you *mean*, ‘stands out from the pack’?! Normal’s fine! Don’t make it some weird fancy thing!”

“So you’re okay with just a regular sword, then? One that looks completely ordinary? No decoration at all?”

“Yeah. I don’t like stuff that looks all flashy. Normal’s fine.”

Most swords in this world were cast. They weren’t like Japanese swords, which were forged by being struck and drawn out over and over again. With transmutation, though, it was possible to make a decent sword even without that process, as long as you created the right metallic bonds. The problems were you needed high-tier Blacksmith, Alchemist, and Mage job skills, and transmuting like that consumed a lot of mana, so it wasn’t the sort of thing that just anyone could do on a whim.

Getting to the point where you *were* capable of that required a fair amount of training; if you wanted any chance at success, you had to devote your entire life to following the path of transmutation. Of course, you could raise your level through combat as well, but most mages just engaged in research without ever actually fighting, so there were none who managed to reach those heights.

“This is...the same sigil you used when you were fixing that sword last time, right? Can you really use it to *make* a sword as well?”

“Making one from scratch is actually easier than repairing one. That last time, I fixed the parts of the sword that were damaged, but doing any intricate work is a pain, you see. You have to find which parts are damaged, and repair all of the tiny little cracks; plus, it uses nearly twice as much mana. It’s not really practical. It’s faster to just make the same sword all over again.”

Zelos answered Lena’s question with a lazy tone. As he did, he continued to work at the task, and the broken sword and materials he’d prepared started to float inside the sigil, writhing in some formless way as if they were mercury or slime.

He added in a small amount of charcoal to help form carbon bonds, used Appraisal to take a look at the metal’s molecular bonds, then added a magic stone to get the metal glowing red-hot without actually generating any heat, at which point he was able to form it back into the shape of a sword.

The whole process took maybe half an hour, but Luceris, who’d never seen transmutation used before, was fascinated.

“This is amazing. I never knew magic could do this sort of thing...”

“I’ve seen it once before, but... Jeez, I never knew you could make a weapon that easily! Blacksmiths are gonna have a hard time competing against *that*.”

Luceris was flat-out astonished, but Jeanne sounded somehow more exasperated than anything else.

Still transmuting, Zelos decided to just bluntly ask the question that had been on his mind. “By the way, do the two of you know each other? It seems like you’re something a fair bit closer than acquaintances, at least.”

The short discussion at the inn’s diner yesterday had made him just a little interested.

“Jeanne and I grew up at the same orphanage. When we got older, we each went our separate ways; I went to train at an abbey, and Jeanne registered at the mercenaries’ guild.”

“I owe Luceris a lot. And I know I can always rely on her healing magic when I get hurt. It’s nice to be able to get healed at a fair price.”

“I just wanted to be like the pastor who raised us. I always think about how it’d be nice to save as many people as I can. I’m still an apprentice, for now, but I’d like to get formally qualified as a priest.”

“I’m no match for the pastor either. She taught me a lot.”

“It sounds like she’s quite the impressive person, eh? That pastor you’re talking about, I mea— Oh?”

Zelos hadn’t thought his response was anything special, but for some reason, it had left Luceris and Jeanne darting their eyes around the place, avoiding his gaze.

The atmosphere was suddenly very awkward, somehow.

“The pastor we’re talking about is, um... How do I say it... She’s a bit of a strange person...”

“She’s real into alcohol and gambling. Good at both—and insane with a sword too. Oh, and she’s got a short fuse. Make her angry and you’re gettin’ thwacked in no time.”

“And you...you *did* say she’s a pastor, yes?”

“Yes, she is. Apparently she caused some problems wherever she was before, so she was transferred to look after our orphanage. I don’t know what exactly she did. But I can probably make a reasonable guess—which perhaps isn’t a good sign, I suppose...”

“She’s the one who taught me how to use a sword, by the way. And I remember her having all these catchphrases... ‘The gods are dead,’ and, ‘The gods are my enemies,’ and, ‘If the gods don’t kill you, I will’...”

This woman they were talking about *was*, apparently, a pastor. But it also sounded like she was the sort of heretic that even the gods should be actively afraid of.

And that was on *top* of the stuff about her indulging in alcohol and gambling. That alone should’ve already been enough to write her off as a failure of a priest.

“Is the Faith of the Four Gods short on clergy members or something? From

everything you're saying, it really feels like she shouldn't have been allowed in..."

"No, it's nothing like that..."

"She's actually got a great sense of duty. A lot of empathy too. She just...sees everything as a meritocracy, and she refuses to rely on the gods. Even during sermons, she'd say, 'Don't expect the gods to do everything for you! Us humans have to be the arbiters of our own sins! Do any of you really think you can just pray your way to a better world? If you *do*—what are you, morons?' So, yeah, she's a bit of a strange one. Set on taking her own path. She was popular, though, for some reason."

"That sounds like more than 'a bit of a strange one,' doesn't it?! She's a full-on heretic, however you look at it!"

But by the sounds of it, however unreasonable her actions were, she *did* have a sense of virtue. Hearing about her was giving Zelos an all-new understanding of the different sorts of people out there in the world.

"Whoa! This is prettier than her old sword, isn't it?!"

"It *does* look like that, yes. Maybe I should get you to make one for me as well! Thankfully, I've already got the materials..."

Now that they'd watched Zelos transmute a quality sword for Jeanne, Iris and Lena were wondering whether they should ask him to make weapons for them as well.

What Zelos had made wasn't some crazily enchanted masterpiece of a weapon, but it was still going to be fairly powerful.

"That should just about do it. More or less. It might still be a little warm, but give it some test swings for me, if you can."

"Sure... *Whoa*. That really *is* warm."

For some reason, when you carried out transmutation, the weapon, medicine, or whatever other item you created was made at about skin temperature. The specifics depended on what exactly you were making, but in some cases, it could make for a very gross, unsettling feeling.

Jeanne gave her new sword a few swings to test out how it felt—and as she did, her breasts bounced with a great deal of force.

It was too stimulating for Zelos, inexperienced with women as he was.

“This is good. Should fit nice and snug in my hands.”

Jeanne was smiling, satisfied with her impressive new sword, while Zelos was equally satisfied from seeing the impressive jiggle of her breasts. It was a sight for sore eyes.



“If you supply it with some mana, you’ll be able to cast Flame Shot from it. Just...please don’t try it out *here*, though, okay?”

“Yeah, I know. Should be able to go kill those damn chickens now...”

“Chickens? Oh, the wild coccos, yes? What, do you want to go and get your revenge?”

“Of *course* I do! We’ve gotta make some money too, remember.”

“Hmm...”

Zelos was interested in keeping some chickens. And so, he was realizing, he might be able to take the ones Jeanne was after. He started running some calculations inside his head.

“I think I’ll go with you, then. I *have* been wondering lately whether I should start to keep some chickens.”

The other four were left in stunned silence. All of their jaws dropped, as if they’d just heard something unbelievable.

“Z-Zelos... Are you really intending to keep wild coccos?”

“You were serious about that?! Those things are ferocious. ‘Wild’ alone doesn’t cut it.”

“Forget about it, Mister. Do you really want to have to *fight* your chickens every day?”

“Zelos? They might *look* like chickens, but they’re proper monsters. Dangerous ones too...”

Zelos still couldn’t visualize the difference between a wild cocco and your average domestic chicken. In fact, he didn’t see the point in trying to draw a line distinguishing monsters from animals in the first place.

But he was underestimating the wild coccos.

“People say their eggs taste good, though, right? That only makes me want to eat them all the more!”

“I would appreciate it if you allowed me to join in on your hunt.”

Before the others had even realized she was even there, a high elf with almost translucent green hair had interrupted their conversation. It was Kaede, the ferocious elf in shrine maiden garb.

“Kaede?! Since when have you been here?!”

“She’s been hiding in the shadows for a while now. Ready to draw her sword at a moment’s notice and point it at...me, I’m fairly sure.”

“So you noticed. I was hoping for you to leave an opening so I could confirm how good a swordsman you are. Though unfortunately, you did not give me even the slightest such opportunity.”

Kaede had been hiding her presence the whole time, intending to attack Zelos the moment he showed an opening.

He’d been suspecting she was there right from the start, though, so her plan for a surprise attack had ended in failure.

“So, what—you want some combat experience, do you? Well, I suppose our opponents are only going to be chickens, so it should be fine. And I’ll be there too, just in case.”

Zelos really wanted to get his hands on some wild cocos.

They might have been monsters, but as long as they could lay some tasty eggs, that was fine by him. He just wanted his beloved tamago kake gohan.

As that thought came to mind, though, he realized a certain something.

“Oh. I still don’t have any soy sauce... Well, *that’s* a bit of a problem, isn’t it? I haven’t made any yet, so the flavor’s going to be all...”

Having finally remembered that little issue, Zelos’s mood took a sudden turn for the worse. Tamago kake gohan without soy sauce was no tamago kake gohan at all.

But when one door is shut, another is opened. There was someone here to extend a helping hand.

“Soy sauce? I have a small amount myself. Would you like for me to give you some?”

“Really? You have some?! Please! Yes! I’d love that! Tamago kake gohan without soy sauce is just plain eggs on rice, after all...”

“In that case: as a condition, may I accompany you on the monster subjugation? I wish to test my abilities.”

“Absolutely! I’d sell my soul to the devil if it got me some soy sauce.”

“Are you implying I am the devil...?”

Zelos wasted no time in responding. Apparently soy sauce was already a thing in the eastern island nation this elf came from.

There were no longer any hurdles standing between Zelos and his tamago kake gohan.

“Now, now—please, guide the way! Off we go! Off on a quest to let me taste tamago kake gohan once again!”

“Chillgale thirsts for blood tonight... Ehe heh heh.”

“Um...Kaede? It’s still midday, you know?”

There was no stopping the two of them now. They were so carried away with their excitement that they could barely even hear what people were saying. Jeanne and the others could only sigh.

Luceris, it seemed, was worried about the two of them getting hurt. She was clearly flustered, shaken by the sudden turn of events.

The all-powerful mage had formed a temporary partnership with this violent beauty of an elven warrior.

Each had their own goal in mind—one hungered for blood, the other for tamago kake gohan...

Chapter 14: The Old Guy Fights to Get Chickens

The poultry farm that Iris and the others had gone to for the subjugation request was in a farming village not even an hour's walk from the city of Santor. Apparently, it belonged to a high-ranking ex-mercenary, who'd returned home after his father had died of an illness. He'd then left the mercenary life behind to take over the family farm and provide for his sickly mother.

From the sounds of it, he'd been a pretty competent mercenary...but it was hard for a mercenary alone to earn enough to support a family. Especially when medical fees for a sickly mother came into the picture, it just wasn't something your average person would be able to manage.

Commoners sometimes wound up with no choice but to sell themselves into slavery, sacrificing themselves, if they wanted the money to treat a sickly family member. Perhaps you call it an indictment on the authorities for letting things get that bad—but wherever you laid the blame, the fact was that deals like that were largely overlooked.

The mercenary's plan to sell wild cocco eggs had been a similar act of self-sacrifice.

Eggs were highly nutritious, and they were seen as luxury goods, so both demand and prices were high. If you wanted to get rich quick, it was about the best market you could possibly ask for. The problem was, these eggs came from *monsters*. The coccos would attack you when you tried to retrieve their eggs, and if you made a routine of it, your wounds would never have time to heal before the new ones piled up.

Here, the wild coccos in question had eventually grown stronger than their owner. The mercenary no longer needed to earn money for his mother's medical expenses these days, but he still had the birds—and now that they'd transformed into ferocious foes, he was unable to lead a normal life.

That was why he'd made the subjugation request that Iris's party had taken on. But the wild coccos had been too strong for them too. The birds had

managed to fend off wave after wave of mercenaries at this point, and each attempt was only making them stronger.

The chickens had been trained into such powerful fighters that even the mercenaries' guild couldn't handle them.

"So the three of you challenged them before, but they turned the tables on you; is that right? It's got me *quite* curious to find out just what kind of birds we're talking about here...♪"

Zelos, Iris, Jeanne, and Kaede were talking about the situation at the farm as they made their way there. Lena, for her part, had gone missing somewhere along the way; specifically, she'd suddenly disappeared at one point to chase after a group of young mercenary boys.

Zelos was feeling good, strolling along with a light gait as he puffed on a cigarette. He was probably looking forward to getting the soy sauce from Kaede.

"My blood boils over. I wish to fight without delay."

"You really *are* bloodthirsty, huh, Kaede? Gotta say, it's not what I would've expected from an elf..."

Kaede, meanwhile, was burning with the will to fight.

"We're nearly there. See that place with the orange roof? That's where the chicken monsters are."

"So that shall be our battlefield, then? The thought of finding a foe strong enough to satisfy me has me shaking with anticipation."

"You sure you're an elf, Kaede? You're not forgetting a 'dark' before that 'elf' word, are you?"

Zelos didn't know *what* was meant to separate the types from each other at this point.

Here with him was a high elf—as their name would suggest, the highest, most esteemed race of elves—who was as bloodthirsty as a wild animal. And if that was possible, he figured, so was pretty much anything. Ultimately, he just gave up thinking about it. "Highest race" or not, he figured that at the end of the day,

every person was just an animal with a will and a sense of self.

As the group got closer to the poultry farm, they got their first taste of what awaited them.

All of a sudden, a man who looked like a mercenary was launched into the air from the yard. As he fell toward the group, spinning through the air, Zelos and the others hurried to get out of the way.

“Aaaaaa— *GYABLOGH!*”

The mercenary hit the ground headfirst, his spinning momentum causing his head to drill through the ground. He ended up half buried, with just his legs sticking out of the ground. It was like a scene out of a terrible tragedy in some village somewhere.

“W-Wait... Was that a Hurricane Mixer?! I thought these things were meant to be chickens?!”

“Ehe heh heh... I can *taste* it. The presence of a strong foe. *This* is what I am here for—the chance to face off against warriors stronger than myself!”

“Why are you sounding like a martial artist?! Anyway, Kaede, don’t do anything too dangerous, okay?!”

The party of four was trembling with fear—and ignoring the man who was stuck in the ground. Zelos was one thing, but Iris and Jeanne had already lost to these enemies once before. And if the cocos had indeed grown even stronger since then, they must have been improving at an impressive rate.

Wild cocos were monsters in the figurative sense too.

“I... I’m getting the sense we’ll need to take this seriously. Just how monstrous *are* these things...?”

“I want to kill. Let me kill. Now. I must let my blade taste their blood...”

“Uh... Kaede? You’re kinda scaring me.”

“You sure you’re an elf? Feels more to me like you’re something else...”

Zelos and the two young mercenary women stepped into the poultry farm, accompanied by a girl who had a rather monstrous bloodlust herself.

What they saw, though, looked less like a farm and more like a devastated building on the verge of ruin.

Defeated mercenaries were piled up like a mountain in the yard. And atop the mountain was a heaving mass of birds, glaring over at the party as if to assert their dominance. They had a real presence.

*

Grappler Cocco, Slasher Cocco, Sniper Cocco, White-Belt Cocco, Archer Cocco, Kendo Cocco

Mutant evolutions of wild coccos.

More powerful than the wild cocco's final evolution, the cockatrice, and incredibly belligerent.

These particular chickens are prodigies specialized in sniping, physical blows, and slashing attacks.

The three weaker types, including the white-belt coccos, are akin to disciples of the three stronger birds, following a hierarchy of strength.

All highly intelligent, to the extent that they are capable of understanding human language. Their meat tastes bad, but their eggs are delicious.

*

"These... These aren't wild coccos, you know? They're...how do I put it...specimens that have evolved beyond that."

"Hwah?!" Jeanne and Iris cried at once.

The chickens continued to stand atop the pile of mercenary bodies, glaring at the party. They were a perfect picture of a gang of thugs. If looks could kill...

"Hmm. I would most like to test my mettle against that bird—the one with the wings that are glimmering like steel. May I?"

“It’s an evolution! It ain’t gonna be easy!”

“By the way, where’s the guy who made the request gone?”

Leaving Zelos aside, Iris and Jeanne were unable to properly take on the request if the client wasn’t here.

But there was no sign of the man in question.

“Well, there’s only so much we can do about that. Apparently these birds can understand human speech to some extent, so I say we go and have a bit of a chat with them ourselves.”

“Seriously...?”

“C’mon, Mister! There’s no way it’s gonna be that easy!”

“I care not either way. As long as I can fight as soon as possible. I yearn for blood... *Blood!*”

One of the party was...a bit of a cause for concern. But Zelos purposefully ignored her as he made his way toward one of the evolved wild coccos, the grappler cocco.

“Where’s your owner? Or...would they be your *former* owner now, I suppose?”

“*Bok...*”

The grappler cocco used the tip of a wing to point to the defeated mercenaries. Among them was a bloodied middle-aged man, his body swollen to the point where he was as plump as a Christmas ham.

On closer look, it seemed he’d taken powerful blow after powerful blow, injuring him badly enough to make his whole body swell with wounds. It was amazing he was even still alive.

It was hard to say whether he was lucky or *unlucky* to be alive, though. Depending on his condition, there was a chance the kindest thing to do would be to put him out of his misery and just behead him.

Also of note was the heart-shaped mark engraved into his forehead like a tattoo.

“Apparently *this* is the guy who made the request? I’m amazed he didn’t just explode...”

“You’re kidding! The last time we saw him, he was all buff!”

“Can the human body even swell up that much?!”

The grappler *cocco* strutted past the dumbfounded onlookers, to the body of the defeated man. And then it made a mighty kick to his head, sending him flying.

“*Nguh!* U-Uuh... Uuh ehinsh...” (Translation: “Y-You demons...”)

“Not quite sure what you’re saying, sorry... Ah, well. *High Heal.*”

“Hang on—the geezer’s able to use healing magic too?!”

“I mean, knowing how Mister is... Yeah, I can accept it. *I* can’t use it, though. I’ve never learned how. Maybe I should buy a scroll?”

With Zelos’s healing magic, the client’s swollen body started to gradually return to normal.

Healed, he looked like a macho skinhead of a middle-aged man.

“What happened to your hair, Bohan? It used to be all thick and fluffy!”

“Those bastards pulled out every last strand... I’m begging you, hurry up and kill them for me!”

“Ah... Actually, I was wondering if I’d be able to keep them myself. It seems like they’d make for some decent guards whenever I’m out of the house. Really, though... You sure are crying, aren’t you? You must’ve really felt at a loss, eh?”

“My chickens? If you want them, you can have them! Show them! Show every last chicken in this field who’s boss!”

“C’mon—you think the guy’d be able to look at that mountain of defeated mercenaries there and *not* feel like crying?”

Bohan’s voice as he shouted for the chickens to be punished sounded like a certain pirate king leaving a final message just as he was about to be killed.

But Zelos had no intent of doing anything of the sort. He just wanted some chickens that laid tasty eggs. He’d never meant to kill them in the first place; if

anything, his experience of keeping chickens back on Earth made him actively want to *protect* them.

Though it was a very different story for a certain bloodthirsty high elf.

“Understood!”

Unlike Zelos, Kaede had been *entirely* intent on fighting from the get-go. Without hesitation, she drew her longsword from the scabbard on her back and set off at a sprint.

Her target was the slasherocco. Both of its wings gleamed silver; it specialized in slashing attacks, and those wings were its weapons.

With a toothpick in its beak, it had a strangely dignified presence. What was more, it had the ability to channel mana to the feathers on its wings, turning those wings into viciously sharp blades.

Sword brandished, Kaede greeted the creature with a rapid diagonal slash from the shoulder. But when her sword made contact, it was repelled with a shrill, high-pitched *TING*. Her first strike had failed—and now, for a moment, she was left defenseless.

Making full use of the opening, the slasherocco leaped toward Kaede’s flank—and then, somehow making a perfect right-angle turn, it closed the gap to her in a flash. Kaede was assailed by slashes from both wings.

“*Tch!*”

Kaede immediately pulled back her longsword, managing to get ahead of the trajectory of the bird’s slashes to just barely defend herself in time. She leaped back, creating space for a moment. Then she closed the gap once more, attacking again and again with her longsword.

SCHWING! KA-CLANG!



Time and time again, the sound of metal against metal rang out through the yard.

The girl and the bird exchanged slashes at dizzying speed, leaving silver trails and flying sparks in the air.

It was an intense exchange of blows.

“Kaede’s amazing too, but...what’s *up* with that chicken?!”

“There’s no way a *chicken* can be that strong. That’s a *warrior*. No doubt about it.”

“The special evolution versus the throwback, eh? This is a match worth watching.”

As the onlookers watched, the bout continued to play out between the two fighters, a constant ebb and flow of offense and defense.

But then, all of a sudden, Zelos sensed something. He shot out his arm around the side of Jeanne’s head.

“Wha—?!”

For a moment, Jeanne wasn’t sure what had happened. But when she realized, she went pale.

Zelos was holding an arrow.

“This would be...the sniper cocco, I assume? No idea where it is, though...”

“Wouldn’t it be in the direction the arrow came from?”

“Only an amateur would shoot a second time from the same spot. It’s probably moving to another position right now, getting ready to shoot again.”

Given that *Zelos* had only felt the slightest presence when the shot was fired, it seemed like this was one stealthy bird.

Seeing as it had used a bow and arrow, its wings were probably structured in a way to give it a wide range of motion. It was possible that its skeletal structure was less like a bird’s and more like a human’s. Zelos picked up a couple of pebbles from the ground and prepared for the sniper’s next shot.

“So, Jeanne—think you can get your revenge? Seems like these things are pretty strong.”

“No way. They’d just end up getting *me* instead. I don’t think I’d even have a chance. I mean, they’re even stronger than last time...”

“Wait—were they holding back on us last time? That’d make me, like, *super* depressed...”

Kaede, for her part, was still exchanging blows with the slasher cocco. But she hadn’t been able to land a decisive blow. It was a similar case for the bird, which seemed to be struggling to close the gap to her on account of its small stature.

The slasher cocco’s small stature made it agile. And to the untrained eye, it might have looked like it was doing well by pushing Kaede back. But the elf was managing to fend off its attacks with only the slightest movements, both defending herself and peppering in counterattacks at the same time.

The pair were trading attacks in such a rapid, impressive flurry that you could hardly believe this was a fight between a child and a chicken. Impressive though they were, both sides were getting tired—but still, neither could finish the match. The slasher cocco leaped back, distancing itself from Kaede.

“You have some impressive skills, for a chicken. Were you humanoid, I imagine you could have made quite the name for yourself as a samurai. It is a shame...”

“Ba-*kaw*! Coco-keh!” (“Whether one is bird or humanoid matters not in the way of the blade. To suggest otherwise is an insult to my honor.”)

Kaede flinched. “That was rude of me. You *are* a splendid warrior... I offer my sincere apologies.”

“Bok-a kakakka ca-caw!” (“If thou beest a samurai too, then speak with thy blade, not thy words. *That* is how a *real* samurai shows respect.”)

Somehow, the two of them were managing to hold a conversation. The coccos being able to understand speech was one thing, but how was *Kaede* managing it? Was it something to do with her being a high elf, perhaps? There was a clear air of tension between the two...enemies? Fellow warriors? But

beyond that, the onlookers could only tilt their heads in confusion as to what was happening.

Kaede returned her longsword to its scabbard, taking an iai stance. The slasherocco spread its wings as if in response, taking a stance of its own.

“I feel like the next hit’s gonna decide who wins...”

“Yeah... She’s one scary girl. She’s already got that much skill with the sword at her age; who *knows* how far she’ll go if she keeps getting better...”

“That elf lass is stronger than all the mercenaries who’ve come here so far! Who *is* she?”

Each of the two had stopped moving. Then slowly, bit by bit, they closed the gap to each other, focusing completely on unleashing a single, devastating blow. The onlookers watched, so caught up in the spectacle that they were forgetting to breathe. The area was engulfed by air so tense it seemed it could crack.

That same air grew heavier and heavier with each cautious step the two of them took. The fighters had sweat running down their brows, and they were so focused that every moment felt like an eternity. As Iris had said, the next blow would likely decide the victor. Things were getting more and more tense.

“Victory or defeat, I shall bear no ill will toward you.”

“Bok. Bokakokko ba-caw...” “Understood. Now, let us do battle...”)

The time had come. But Zelos realized now that a certain other something had been using the tension to maneuver unnoticed behind the scenes.

“To battle!”

“Ba-caw!” (“To battle!”)

Right as the two of them started to move, the sniperocco fired an arrow.

It had been waiting for the group to get engrossed in watching the battle and let down their guard. But Zelos was ready. First, he used Snap Fingers to intercept the arrow, flicking it out of the air. Then he used it again, firing off a shot toward the dishonorable rooftop bird that had failed in its sneak attack.

Hit with the countersnipe, the sniper cocco dropped to the ground. At the same time, Kaede and the slasher cocco locked blades—or, rather, blade and wing—their fighting spirit on full display.

THWISH!

As longsword and wing collided, what should have been a simple marriage of blades managed to somehow emit a shock wave. The force knocked Kaede back—though Zelos, who just happened to be in a convenient spot, was able to catch her.

The slasher cocco was blown away too, ramming into a flock of its chickeny compatriots.

“Is Kaede okay?!”

“She’s fine. She took quite the attack, though... It looks like she fainted.”

“What happened to the chicken? Did she kill it?”

“No, it’s still alive. Take a good look at Kaede’s longsword. It’s sharp, but it doesn’t have a proper blade.”

The slasher cocco had fainted too, though its unconscious body seemed to have a very satisfied smile on its face.

For a chicken, it seemed incredibly manly. By the way, as a side note, the sniper cocco had been aiming for its owner. And—perhaps because of its habit as a sniper, or perhaps because it harbored such a grudge that it actively wanted to kill the man—it had taken the care to slather the arrowhead with a highly lethal neurotoxin.

One thing, at least, was clear: the sniper cocco had been fully intent on killing Bohan.

“Now, that just leaves one more... The grappler cocco, eh?”

“No way I can handle it. I *wanted* to try and get my revenge, but I can’t fight like *that!*”

“I can’t either! I mean, I’m a mage!”

With Kaede having fainted, then, the task of taking on the grappler cocco

inevitably fell to Zelos.

Heaving a deep sigh, he accepted his duty and moved to take the bird on.

“You see, the thing is, I’d prefer if you just came with me to my place. If you’re willing to do that, we don’t need to fight.”

“Kococco! Koke ka ba-caw!” (“After a fight like that, I’m itching for a battle of my own. I ask that you be my opponent.”)

Zelos let out another sigh. “Guess you don’t leave me any choice— Wait, what? How can I understand you? What’s going on?”

For whatever reason, it seemed like Zelos could also understand what this bird was saying. It was yet another of the strange mysteries of this world.

Reluctantly, Zelos took a stance. He was struggling to motivate himself—as opposed to the chicken opposite him, which seemed to have a burning desire to fight. Still, he figured, refusing here would leave a scar on his honor. He had no real choice but to step forward and accept the challenge.

The moment the two squared off against each other, he got a sense of the grappler cocco’s strength.

The creature had such an aura that he could scarcely believe it was a *chicken*. It was clearly a powerful foe—even stronger than the other two.

For a moment, the outline of the grappler cocco’s body seemed to blur.

“Ngh?!”

Zelos crossed his arms and blocked a blow far stronger than he’d ever expected to take from a chicken.

The grappler cocco had hit him with its armlike wings before he’d even had a chance to process what was happening. He got knocked a few meters back—though somehow, he’d managed to brace his legs enough to stay standing.

“Hard to believe a hit like that could come from such a little thing. I suppose I’ll have to actually *try* for the first time in a while, eh?”

A dangerous glint appeared in Zelos’s eyes. He was back to being “the Zelos from back then.”

He got his breathing in order and started circulating mana—no, *ki*—throughout his body to strengthen himself. His Divine Brawler job skill had activated, starting to change his abilities from those of a mage to those of a martial artist.

Mages were able to cast magic by utilizing the internal mana in their body and the external mana in nature, whereas martial artists tempered and circulated the ki in their body to bolster their combat skills. Essentially, going from mage to brawler meant getting worse at long-distance attacks, but it allowed you to use any noncaster skills you wanted alongside each other. Given the situation, that trade-off seemed fair enough to Zelos right now.

“Let’s go...”

Zelos used flash steps to close the gap between him and the grappler cocco, then promptly stopped in his tracks and delivered a kick.

The grappler cocco, which itself had just flown forward, suddenly found itself in the path of a barrage of attacks. It was quick to read the situation, though, and responded with a flurry of its own.

THWOMP! FSH! SCHWOO-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM!

Their impacts were making the sorts of sounds you’d never actually hear from a fight in real life.

“Bo-keh?! Cacacacrah!” (“S-So strong! What a joyous occasion, to be able to fight a man of this caliber...”)

“Well, someone’s happy! Were you really itching for a fight that much?”

“Ca-kekeh, bokaba kebokeh!” (“Challenging the strong to hone yourself is the calling of any who walk the path of battle.”)

“I like your attitude! Well, then—show me what you’ve got!”

“*Bok!*” (“Understood!”)

Having created some distance after their flurry of blows, the grappler cocco capitalized on its agility to leave afterimages, attempting to confuse Zelos. The bird drew closer at an impressive speed before hammering him with another powerful rush of kicks.

Zelos used both arms to handle the attacks, as if he was letting them wash over him. And then, the moment he saw an opportunity, he seized on it without delay to send a strong punch toward the cocco. But it was as if the bird had been waiting for exactly that.

The grappler cocco coiled around Zelos's arm, using his momentum to try and throw him. Recognizing what the bird was doing, Zelos twisted his arm a little to loosen his foe's grip, then simultaneously pulled his arm out, grabbed the cocco, and moved to slam it against the ground. But the cocco, too, saw the attack coming. It instantly twisted its body to free itself, then wasted no time flapping its wings to get outside of Zelos's range.

"H-Hey, old guy... How the hell are you so strong?"

"I'd be surprised if he *couldn't* do something like that. He's one of the Destroyers, you know!"

"Why's he got such a scary nickname? Did he do something?"

"All *sorts* of things..."

"Not too important, but girlie... He ain't a mage at this point, right? What *is* he?"

The grappler cocco was at a disadvantage.

Its fighting spirit was as hot as ever, though. If anything, it was only growing hotter as the fight went on. And the creature looked *happy*, somehow.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Bokabokabokabokabokabok!"

Again, the two began a head-on slugfest, fierce fists flying back and forth.

Each was loading their fists—or wings—up with ki, and intercepting each other's blows. The violent sounds of impact after impact echoed throughout the field.

The two fighters were attacking to leave afterimages; you could almost imagine them screaming *ORA ORA ORA!* or *ATATATATA!* as they fought. Each kept up the barrage, neither taking a step back. Their fists were flying with such force that anyone who found themselves caught by them would probably be

obliterated by a single hit.

The only reason the bystanders were safe was that the pressure from each collision of strikes was canceling out, the shock waves dissipating before they reached anyone else.

Sometimes, the two would distance themselves, then leap high up in the sky to exchange kicks. Then they'd continue to trade blows with their fists as they fell back down to the ground.

"You're, uh...probably dead if even *one* of those hits you right? And, wait, I thought the old guy was a *mage*?"

"I think he's more of, like, an...all-rounder? Or something like an assassin? I've heard he's good at just suddenly appearing in the middle of a group of enemies and taking them all out at once with area magic..."

"Uh, girlie... There's no way that's a *mage* you're talking about. You make him sound like he's from some kind of secret army unit!"

As Zelos continued to fire off deadly strike after deadly strike, he had no idea that the bystanders were refusing to accept what his job was.

He was moving like such a professional, though, that he couldn't have blamed them for it. After all, he'd done this kind of thing plenty of times before, even if those times *were* just in a virtual world.

He'd been a source of dread for any gankers—if they got caught by him, they were done for, and they'd be in for a real beating.

Legend says that the middle-aged man and the chicken continued to exchange blows until sunset.

*

Early in the evening, when the land was beginning to fall under the veil of darkness, the grappler *cocco* finally exhausted itself, having used up every last bit of its strength in the fight. Nonetheless, it looked incredibly satisfied. It had fought with everything it had, and its face wore a sincere, happy smile—or at least, what *looked* like a smile, by chicken standards.

Zelos, meanwhile, hadn't even broken a sweat. In fact, it had made him

realize just how monstrous, how absurd, his stamina was in this body. It made him a little scared of himself.

He *had* been taking the fight seriously. But by the back end of the fight, he'd started to notice just how much of an exception he was, and that it wasn't going to be much of a real match.

He'd been trying to go at it with everything he had, but he'd still been composed enough to analyze every move with a calm mind.

Even just thinking about what would happen if he *really* went all out on the offense was enough to make him dizzy.

And now, the evolved chickens were beginning to prostrate themselves before him, showing their submission.

"Do I, uh... Do I take this to mean that you're happy to obey me now?"

"Bokaw!" ("Indeed!")

"Cococco! Cokah!" ("We are humbled by your strength. We beg of you, become our mentor!")

"Koba, bobokoko kekko." ("To think that a foe could best my one-hit kill... I must train harder.")

Birds that evolved from wild cocco respected the strong.

Once they recognized someone as their mentor, they would follow that mentor until they became strong enough to be independent, then leave the nest.

Eventually, they'd start their own flock and pass on what they'd learned—a never-ending cycle of growing stronger.

In a sense, they were scarier than cockatrices. They might well have been the most troublesome monster you could get.

"I suppose I don't mind, as long as I'm able to take your unfertilized eggs. I've got the Appraisal skill, so I can tell which ones are fertilized and which ones aren't."

This was why the chickens had rebelled against their former owner.

Eggs were, after all, how the birds created offspring. And a newly laid egg could be either fertilized or unfertilized.

If an egg were unfertilized, there would be no chance of any chick hatching from it, so the birds wouldn't mind if someone ate it. But if the egg *were* fertilized, it could give birth to a chick. So, to the birds, fertilized eggs being taken was a matter of life or death.

Bohan had just been taking eggs at random, unaware of even that basic fact. So the birds here had lost faith in him and eventually rebelled—kicking off the whole chain of events. In a sense, it came down to parents getting revenge after their children were snatched away. Survival of the fittest might well have been the law of the land here, but animals still cherished their children.

That being the case, Zelos's Appraisal skill meant that he wouldn't give the birds any reason to form a grudge against him.

"What have you been feeding them, Bohan?"

"Just tell me where you live, and I'll have it sent to you. Once these things are gone, I'm thinking of raising some cows..."

"Uh, Mister Bohan? Kinda sounds like you're setting yourself a death flag there..."

"At any rate, it seems I will have a worthy foe for my blade living close by. This is most fortunate."

"Kaede... You *sure* you wanna fight that thing again?"

Now that the bloodthirsty high elf had a rival in the form of the slasher cocco, she seemed intent on heading further down the path of violence. The other three who'd come here with her could do nothing but sigh.

At any rate, Zelos had gotten himself thirteen chickens. They would provide him with eggs, and in exchange, he would train them in fighting. Zelos would also get something *else* out of it: he'd now have some mighty guard chickens to protect his house.

It was still too early to tell what exactly these ferocious chickens would try to get up to, and what their fates would be.

One thing *was* clear, though: they hoped to become the strongest monsters out there, and they'd devote themselves to their training to achieve just that.

By the time Zelos arrived home, it was already dusk, and Santor's old town was quiet.

Zelos used a magic-stone-powered lamp to light up his room, and sat down in a haphazardly placed chair.

The thirteen chickens would be living out in his field, now, supplying him with eggs. All of a sudden, he was starting to worry about the risk of clueless visitors ending up as casualties. But the birds were smart enough to understand things, if he talked to them, so he figured he'd just be able to explain things to them bit by bit.

For now, it was time to start preparing dinner. But that was when he noticed a long hair stuck to his robe.

It was a thin, almost transparent hair. One that must have stuck to him when he'd caught Kaede earlier. But that wasn't what caught his interest.

"Hmm... So now I have both a magimorph seed and a high elf hair. Once I get the rest of what I need, all that'll be left is to lay out a hexglyph with my blood, and I'll be able to make a homunculus..."

Zelos still didn't have enough materials to create a homunculus. He was missing the all-important spirit crystal.

"I have the Dark God Soul... The question is, whether I want to cause some strife for the four gods or not. What to do, what to do... Well, I suppose I can think about it after I get my hands on a spirit crystal. I'm not in a hurry."

Zelos still hadn't forgiven the gods of this world for what they'd done to him.

They'd only reincarnated him to apologize to the gods from his *old* world—and even then, it was just something that they'd done reluctantly after receiving complaints. It was another fine example of just how lazy they could be.

Not to mention, while they *had* reincarnated him, their arrangements in doing so had been incredibly sloppy, dropping him right into the midst of a vast forest

teeming with terrifying monsters. If the gods were going to reincarnate their victims, they could've at least reincarnated them all in the one spot...but instead, they'd been incredibly half-hearted about it, as if they'd thought, *Well, we gave 'em cheat skills, so...meh, we can just drop 'em wherever, right?* Or maybe they'd even put their victims in dangerous spots on *purpose*, for entertainment.

Of course, there were *some* individuals, like Iris, who were simply enjoying their lives in this new world, and had no intention of going out and messing it up with reckless conflict. But that didn't mean Zelos was just going to while away his days doing nothing...

"Now, let's have a think. This is *quite* the tough decision... Heh heh heh..."

Zelos was cackling, wearing a clever grin that was unlike any expression he'd made before in this world. It shone a light into the depths of the malice he usually kept hidden.

As he did, the metallic machines he'd positioned underground let out an eerie groan, almost as if they were responding to their maker's latent animosity. Zelos was ready to spring into action as soon as he got the final materials he needed.

Everything from there was going to depend on how things played out.

Chapter 15: The Old Guy Gets the Wind Taken Out of His Sails

The town was shrouded by night. Most people were either fast asleep or out seeking a moment of pleasure to unwind after a tough day of work. One man, though, was wide awake in his room, holding on to a certain something and evaluating it to make sure he'd finally succeeded. After a while, he was convinced: this was the real deal. One corner of his mouth curled into a smile, and he chuckled to himself.

Outwardly, the man was a capable businessman. But behind the scenes, he wore a second mask: that of a black marketeer, selling goods through illegal channels. He'd make use of any method at his disposal if it got him whatever items he was after, and he was perfectly happy to entrap people—sometimes even order his lackeys to *deal with* them—if it helped him to jack up prices.

The item he was holding now was a necklace with two beautifully translucent gems set in it. In the right situation, it could be considered priceless. It was such a masterpiece that it wouldn't be surprising to see it locked up in a national treasure house, and the man here had spurned no means to get his hands on it.

The necklace's former owner was already six feet under, and the necklace itself had enough of a reputation that he wouldn't be able to sell it openly. A search would be underway by tomorrow; that much was for sure.

Still, there were plenty of people out there who'd want this sort of thing, however illegal it was. He already had a list of vendors he could sell it to, so he figured he wouldn't have much trouble selling it off pronto.

When you were selling on the black market, you wanted to get your illegal goods out of the country and sold as quickly as you could.

"My, my... He just *had* to make things hard, didn't he? If only he'd sold it to me when I'd asked, he wouldn't have had to die like that..."

The man ran his fat fingers over the necklace as he let out a mocking laugh at

the expense of its deceased former owner. Its splendid decoration brought a vulgar smile to his lips.

He didn't know exactly *how* much money he'd get for selling it, but it'd be enough to leave his pockets swelling rather handsomely, that much was for certain.

After all, this necklace was a magic tool. It had quite the artistic value too —*and* it had been found in ancient ruins, to boot. Just *thinking* about how much it might sell for left the man unable to wipe the grin off his face.

"A treasure made by an elf in ancient times, hm? *Most* magnificent. Aha ha h — *Ngh!* Wh-What's..."

Feeling a sudden pain at the back of his neck, the man reached out to touch where it was coming from...and found a thin needle piercing his flesh. Fat as he was, he had a lot of excess flab on him, and it had obstructed the needle, preventing it from sinking too deep. But his body was starting to feel numb, and he was struck with the overwhelming urge to vomit.

"*Ogh! U-Ugh... Blrgh... Gakh...*"

He was suffocating now, and it was getting worse with each passing moment. Then his nausea was joined by dizziness, and a terrible headache. He was paralyzed as well—too badly to even call for help. In his panic, all he could do was understand that he'd somehow been struck by a poison needle.

But of course, he'd had lackeys do the same thing to other people plenty of times. It was a perfect case of karma.

And from how things were going, it seemed like this was quite the *fast-acting* poison. It was already too late. He could do nothing but suffer now, the same as all the people he'd had killed before—and then, just like that, he drew his final breath.

The room's owner was dead, now, leaving it empty. Or...not *quite* empty, perhaps. Something was slithering in the dark.

A black shadow was forming, as if it had oozed right up through the floorboards.

The shadow continued to writhe and flicker. And then, eventually, it coalesced into the shape of a human—a woman in her twenties. Between the black dress that emphasized her chest and all the jewelry she was wearing, she wouldn't have looked out of place standing in a group of noblewomen. Yet rather *unlike* a noblewoman, seeing the gruesome scene did nothing but bring a faint smile to her face. She approached the table where the man had been sitting, picked up the necklace, and nodded with satisfaction.

“Okay. This looks pretty good. Aha ha ha... Don't blame me, okay? This is just part of my job.”

When you worked in the underworld, your life was always in danger. That much was a given. The man here had been targeted by another group, and now he was lying dead; that was all there was to it. It was nothing more than a business rival deciding to rid themselves of a pest using the convenient little tool known as murder.

“I thought this was going to be a pain of a job. Now that I've got my hands on something like *this*, though, I'm glad I agreed to do it... Aha ha.”

She'd just killed someone, but she was far more preoccupied with the jewelry he'd left behind.

And then, just like that, the necklace disappeared from her hands.

“While I'm at it, should I take a few *more* things, I wonder? He might have some other nice stuff hidden around.”

The woman slipped into the shadows once again, vanishing from the room.

All that was left behind was the corpse of a greedy merchant who'd gone too deep into his illegal dealings.

The man's body wasn't found until the next morning. Nobody had any idea who'd killed him, though, and ultimately, the investigation was called off.

However hard the authorities looked into it, they couldn't find even a single piece of evidence that pointed to a culprit.

The victims who'd had their lives turned upside down by the man were thrilled to hear the news.

It was early in the morning. Zelos had just finished his daily weeding and started training with his newly acquired chickens.

There were thirteen of the birds, and they were practicing their punches and kicks in perfect sync, as if they were some group of samurai drilling their forms with the sword. The white-belt, kendo, and archer coccos alike were training in the same forms, working around the clock to try and evolve into something stronger.

Meanwhile, Zelos had decided to give names to each of the three strongest birds—the grappler, the slasher, and the sniper. He'd named them Ukei, Zankei, and Senkei, and tasked them with overseeing the other birds.

It seemed like naming these chickens had somehow made them even stronger than before...but Zelos decided not to worry about it too much. This world already had its fair share of special rules—the existence of magic, for one—so he figured it wasn't all that strange for named monsters to be a thing as well. He ultimately just shrugged it off with some questionable logic: "I don't care if they get stronger. I just want them to lay me some tasty eggs."

The three named chickens were growing even more loyal to Zelos, and they'd started to help him with his work in the field on top of their daily training. That had prompted the other birds to start helping him with his field work too, so fortunately, he no longer needed to hire any helping hands. The birds would even eat any pests they found in the field; they were quite the convenient helpers.

The one thing that confused Zelos was that even the chickens specializing in long-range attacks, including the sniper cocco, were trying to learn martial arts techniques.

"Why are you guys practicing martial arts? You were more long-range support fighters, weren't you?"

"Bokaw. Cococco, bo-cah!" ("We have come to understand that we cannot rely on shooting alone. There may be times where we need to fight up close.")

"As long as you don't end up turning into a jack-of-all-trades, master of none,

I guess. And, well, I suppose thinking about what you want to be is just another part of training... I'm talking about, say, what you want to evolve into next."

Honestly, Zelos didn't know what exactly these birds were trying to do, or what their ultimate goal was.

They were, to begin with, subspecies that had emerged when wild cocos had been trained under unusual circumstances. It was untrod ground; there was no way of knowing how they'd change from here on out.

Just recently, the chickens had learned from Kaede how to read and write. They'd started playing shogi too, and they were making weapons, to boot...they were really making the most of their time. Monsters being able to adapt to their environment was nothing new, but in this particular case, Zelos was seriously scared thinking about just what might happen next. The evolution process could even lead to the creation of powerful beings known as demon lords, so there was a real chance that this group could give rise to something truly terrifying with time.

"*Ngh*. Gotten better over just the last few days, have you? You birds are a force to be reckoned with."

"Ko-keh! Bocacacaw!" ("I can still become stronger! And the same is true of you as well, of that I am certain. Your skill with the blade seems even greater than yesterday.")

"The path of the blade cannot be traversed in a single day. One must never neglect their daily training. Especially if there are strong opponents to fight!"

Next to the group practicing their forms was Kaede, the high elf who'd chosen the path of violence, engaged in a fierce clash of blows with Zankei. It seemed like Zelos had found himself surrounded by some rather fighting-obsessed company.

As a side note—Zelos had already stopped thinking about the whole "people being able to converse with chickens" thing at this point. He'd ended up hand-waving it with, "Well, it *is* another world, so..."

It might have been a wise choice.

After Zelos had finished his early-morning field work and training, it was time for something he'd been looking forward to for a long time. He was already getting emotional.

In front of him was a rice bowl, filled with steaming white rice and topped with an egg. Yes: it was finally *tamago kake gohan time*.

He added a dash of the soy sauce he'd gotten from Kaede, mixed the egg in with the white rice, and stirred frantically, struggling to hold back his emotions as he waited for it all to turn nice and yellow.

Unfertilized eggs carried a risk of parasites, but Zelos's Appraisal skill prevented him from needing to worry about that. And so he was finally reunited with his favorite dish. Stirring complete, he swallowed his saliva in anticipation.

"H-Here we go..."

Zelos took the rice bowl into his hand with the resolve of a man about to head into battle. And then, suddenly, he shoveled some tamago kake gohan into his mouth.

He waited for the rich taste of the egg and the umami of the soy sauce to come together as a perfect whole, creating heaven in his mouth, and...

Well. It *was* a good egg. The problem was...

"Hmm. It's definitely tasty. It is! But it's too rich... Something's just not right. This isn't the simple flavor I wanted..."

It tasted nice, but it was nothing like the tamago kake gohan that he remembered.

The egg was just too rich, smothering the umami of the soy sauce. It left Zelos feeling unsatisfied with the whole thing. It wasn't even like the soy sauce was reduced to some subtle secret ingredient; its umami simply lost out completely to the richness of the egg.

"Oh, all of the gods and goddesses who might be out there... Is this another trial? Are you telling me to go and make myself the perfect soy sauce to go with these? I *can't*! I'm not some famous manga foodie like Yamaoka or Kaibara!

About the best I could do is make *normal* soy sauce...”

These eggs were less like cheap supermarket ones, and more like Silkie eggs or those fancy iodine-enriched eggs you could get. No—they were richer even than those. Zelos, with his unsophisticated palate, felt like he didn’t stand a chance at making a soy sauce that’d pair well with the eggs from his wild cocco subspecies. These were nothing like your average old chicken eggs. They were a whole different thing.

Once before, back on Earth, Zelos had used his time living out in the countryside to try and make some soy sauce himself. But it had ended up tasting just average.

“This is a *tragedy*. I never would’ve thought the eggs would be like *this*...”

There was the old saying, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,”...but just one step ahead of Zelos was a cliff face looming far overhead. As much as he might’ve wanted to push on, the challenge seemed beyond him.

“God is dead. I’m not sure I can believe in anything anymore...”

Not that that sounded particularly convincing, coming from a man who’d never been religious in the first place.

He was really making a mountain out of a molehill; it was just some tamago kake gohan. But you’d probably understand how he felt if you were to spend years living in some secluded corner of a foreign country. He could long for the simple food of Japan all he wanted; it wouldn’t remove the imposing wall that stood between him and the proper taste of home. In fact, it was something like being in that foreign country and finding a dish labeled as Japanese food, only to find it was actually nothing *like* it. Imagine that, and you’d probably be able to get a decent hold on the depths of the despair Zelos was feeling.

The tamago kake gohan he’d eaten just now was a different beast altogether. It tasted good, but different to how he wanted it to taste. And while Zelos was skilled with technology, he was no better than an amateur when it came to food. The fact that he’d even managed to make his own soy sauce and miso before at all was impressive by his standards; actually trying to make a specific soy sauce with a flavor that matched these particular eggs was far beyond his skill set. He had cheat skills, but that didn’t mean he could do *everything*.

He was in quite the pickle, and it had his spirits sinking low enough to hit the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

“If I *did* want to make soy sauce and miso, I’d need wheat, koji, salt, and soybeans. Soybeans, huh...?”

He had some beans called jackbeans growing in his field. They grew almost like trees, and bore fruit that resembled pomegranates. Inside that fruit, though, were mung beans, broad beans, and all sorts of other beans. Soybeans were the most numerous of all, apparently, but the amount you could get was right on the borderline of being enough for making soy sauce and miso.

The plants in this world were strange in all sorts of ways, as Zelos would find out at some point later by looking through a field guide.

“It...might be best if I left that sort of thing to someone else. I feel like it’s too far beyond what a single amateur can do.”

He could make some very run-of-the-mill soy sauce and miso, but the eggs from these superadvanced chickens were so luxurious that any half-assed seasonings would be overpowered with ease. Still, Zelos refused to give up. He sent his mind into overdrive, trying to think of any way to get his hands on the seasonings he’d need.

“Hopefully I can at least get some decent sake... That’s the one thing I haven’t tried to make before, though.”

In modern-day Japan, you couldn’t make sake unless you had a license. Zelos would have to go about that pretty much entirely through trial and error, then—it’d be tougher than making soy sauce and miso.

Besides, while Zelos *had* spent a lot of time living out in the countryside, he’d still bought just about all of his seasonings. Outside of the couple of experiments he’d done, he was clueless when it came to making them himself. But he *did* want to recreate that taste of home. It was only then, he felt, that he would finally be able to move forward with his life.

And of course, this wasn’t just some hidden corner of Earth, but a different world altogether. Perhaps that was just a matter of perspective, but nonetheless, it only served to make his attachment to Japanese food that much

stronger.

“I guess fish sauce could work too, but that stuff stinks pretty bad when it’s fermenting, and I don’t want to bother the neighbors...”

As Zelos said, the smell of fermenting fish sauce was atrocious. If you screwed up, you’d end up with nothing but a foul-smelling fishy brine; you had to be pretty brave to try and make it at home. Zelos ate as he continued to rack his brains.

As he tried to think through what seemed like a never-ending string of concerns, Ukei opened the door and came inside.

“Bokaw! Boka bo-ke.” (“A guest has arrived, Leader. What shall we do?”)

“A guest? Wonder who. I don’t think I had anyone scheduled to come... Hmm.”

“Bok!” (“I cannot say!”)

“Well, I guess I’ll head straight out to meet them. It could always be Creston.”

Zelos headed straight to his front door, opened it, and saw an attractive middle-aged man standing there quietly.

He looked like the sort of man you’d find elegantly shaking a cocktail at a bar somewhere—but in reality, he was Dandis, a butler of the Solistia ducal house. He was only behind the duke, Delthasis, when it came to stylish middle-aged gentlemen.

“Oh, if it isn’t Dandis! It’s been a while. What brings you here?”

“Yes, it has been a while indeed, Sir Zelos. To tell you the truth, His Grace would most like to see you, and so I have come to meet you on his behalf. If you are free of any pressing business, I would most appreciate having you accompany me to the ducal residence posthaste.”

“Is it something urgent, then? There’s not really anything I need to do here, but...I’m just curious. Don’t tell me it’s just a request to make him something, is it...?”

Regardless, Zelos figured it’d be rude to make a guest wait outside any longer. He invited Dandis into his house.

Most of the things Zelos made were highly dangerous. He had next to nothing in the way of nice, safe magic tools; almost everything he made was some powerful weapon that could change the course of the world, were it to be used.

Of course, if he wanted to, he *could* make items specifically for self-defense. He was just never quite in the mood to do so. Back when he was playing *Swords & Sorceries*, he'd spent a good chunk of time engrossed in recklessly making explosives, all while shouting, "Art is an explosion!"

In other words, he'd been casually acting like he was an antagonist in a certain manga about ninjas.

Of course, he was acting as *himself* now, not a character, so he didn't feel like being quite that reckless anymore. But that didn't erase the fact that he *had*, not that long ago, been a well and truly full-grown adult obsessed with role-playing a terrorist in a video game. It was a relatively recent slice of a dark history that he would've preferred to forget.

"Oh? Were you in the middle of a meal?"

"Yes. I just happened to get my hands on some high-quality eggs, you see. So I gave them a taste, but...they don't go too well with the seasonings I've got, so I'm not sure what to do."

"Seasonings, you say? Hm, hm... Is this soy sauce, perhaps? They make it over in an island nation to the east, if I remember correctly."

"I can make regular soy sauce myself if I have to, but the eggs I have here—cocco eggs—just taste so good that they overpower the soy sauce's flavor. So it'd be nice if I had some slightly stronger tasting soy sauce, but..."

"Oh? Did you not buy this soy sauce from Solistia Trading, then? I do seem to remember the company producing and selling its own soy sauce and miso..."

"*Hwah?!*"

Zelos's train of thought derailed.

"I was saying, Solistia Trading should sell some, if you happen to be interested. The company formed a partnership with some merchants from the East a while ago, so if I am not mistaken, such goods can be procured within

Solistia now... Were you not aware?"

"Well, well, how about that? I never would've thought they were being sold right under my nose... Just how many pies does that duke of yours have his fingers in?"

"He sells anything he can sell, and uses any method he can to obtain whatever he can buy. With the ongoing conflict in the East, there has been no shortage of refugees who were left unable to continue their work there as traders and crafters, so I hear we were able to scout them out to work for us under some rather favorable conditions."

"Sounds like the duke's got more cheat abilities than I do, huh...? He really isn't your average guy."

The Great Sage was thoroughly outclassed by the ultimate homegrown superduke, reincarnation cheats be damned.

As a side note, the soy sauce and miso sold by Solistia Trading tasted impressive enough that they were in high demand from luxury restaurants. It seemed like they'd made quite the name for themselves as expensive gourmet seasonings.

The ingredients used here were different to those found in the East, so the refugees had worked to improve the result in line with the local conditions. They'd reached a decent level of mass production by this point, and they were *still* managing to sell out. All of the crafters making the seasonings had come from the East.

It was a fair system too; they were properly employed as skilled crafters, not forced into labor as slaves.

"Only thing is, Solistia Trading always seems so upper-class that I feel awkward going inside. They're set up in such a prime location too. I feel like even people *other* than me would be a little shy about entering..."

"Aha ha. Certainly, the air of it isn't particularly tailored toward commoners. Everyone who shops there says something along those lines."

"Yeah, 'not tailored toward commoners' seems about right. Anyway, who would've thought there'd be a place selling soy sauce and miso so nearby...? I

should never underestimate the duke.”

Duke Delthasis lived for two things: his work, and his time playing with women. Zelos wasn’t sure what his management philosophy was like, but based on how the man seemed to be doing a respectable job of dealing with his duties as both a duke and a businessman, there was no denying that the word “talented” alone didn’t do him justice. Just thinking about the extent of the man’s absurd management skills left Zelos struck with equal parts awe and fear.

Even if what he was *most* amazed by was the soy sauce and miso...

“Getting back to the topic, though... I wonder what he wants me for? Did he tell you anything?”

“I have heard nothing of it. Or, rather...no. I do know *one* thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“He said something about wishing for you to come dressed as formally as you could. It would seem your last visit left you with quite the poor reputation in the eyes of his wives...”

Now that Dandis mentioned it, it was a fair point; Zelos’s typical outfit consisted of a dirty gray robe and two swords. It undeniably made him look incredibly shady, and it wasn’t at all the sort of thing one should wear to go to speak with a duke. Yet that was precisely what he had worn on his last visit to Delthasis—and now, it was sounding like that had left a sour taste in the mouths of the man’s wives. You didn’t have to think about it too hard to realize it was improper behavior.

Now, while Zelos didn’t particularly mind being hated by the rich and powerful, he didn’t want to get on the bad side of the man who could be his soy sauce and miso supplier. Still, even if he *wanted* to come in formal dress, he didn’t really have anything in his closet that fit the bill...

After some thought, he reached a compromise: he’d go to meet Delthasis wearing his finest armor.

“Give me a minute, please. I’ll just go neaten myself up a bit...”

“Of course. I could hardly fault a Great Sage for wishing for some privacy.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Still, though, I wonder how long it’s been since the last time I put some effort into my appearance...”

Zelos hadn’t really cared about his looks for the past seven years or so.

He headed to the bathroom and got right to shaving his stubble; then he neatened up his hair, which had been growing out in every which way.

While he didn’t have any hair care products, he *did* have some vegetable oil he used for potion-making. And appraising it allowed him to confirm that it was also sometimes used for hair care.

This particular oil was obtained by crushing and squeezing the mirewyd fruit. It wasn’t a particularly good oil for eating, though, so it was mainly used by adding small quantities to medicines to increase their efficacy. Incidentally, it was most common in stomachache medicines; apparently, it had a similar effect to castor oil if you took it in the right quantity.

Zelos frequently used it when making potions himself, so fortunately, he had a lot of it sitting around.

“So, let’s straighten up my bangs with this oil... And, hmm, the hair at the back of my head’s grown out quite a lot, hasn’t it? I guess I’ll tie that up...”

He’d been shaving his facial hair with a knife. From a regular person’s point of view, it was a pretty dangerous way of doing things.

Zelos, though, was so frugal that he’d held back from buying a shaver—opting to just use a kitchen knife instead—so he was used to this by now. At this rate, it seemed likely he’d *never* end up buying a razor.

When that was done, he took out his best set of armor from his inventory. The main attractions were a coat-like robe made from the hide of a black dragon, and a breastplate made from the scales of one. Paired with those were armored greaves and gauntlets made from the carapace of an armored black dragon. On the whole, it made him look like some kind of armored priest.

Everything he was wearing was black; that it somehow looked awfully holy despite that was impressive. It also had little bits of handiwork and other decorations here and there, giving it a refined, elegant look.

The *main* features of this gear, though, were that it had been enchanted to the extreme, and that it used materials so precious that your average mage could never even hope to get their hands on them. If Zelos were to use his Appraisal on the set, it'd probably say that its defensive capabilities were on par with legendary armor.

Strangest of all, though, was the staff he was holding. At its head was a longsword made from rare metals; it included black dragon scales and carapace, and gave off an incredibly sinister vibe, as if it were a shining black cross.

Its shape—designed after the sort of spear used in Hozoin-ryu martial arts—only made it look all the more ominous. Zelos had named it the Enchanted Magic Staff V-54. And while it *looked* like a spear, it was still also a staff that worked as a magic conduit, making it an absurd weapon that, despite its simplicity, was capable of magic attacks as well.

In addition to the staff, Zelos had two combat knives at his waist, as well as several throwing knives hidden in a pocket.

By the way, this gear set was why he was known as the Black Destroyer. When he was wearing this, he was unmatched in battle.

“This is the first time I’ve worn this over here, huh? The chuunibyou vibes are making me kinda embarrassed...”

With his hair neatened up and his eyes exposed, Zelos gave off the image of a mild-mannered, slit-eyed man.

Opening his eyelids even just a bit, though, made those almond-shaped eyes of his look honestly scary. He knew himself how coldhearted they made him look, so it stood to reason that other people would get the same impression.

Still, while he wasn’t outright *handsome*, it wasn’t as if he had nothing to work with.

For the finishing touch, he donned a hat of distinctive design, made from black dragon membrane, black ore spider silk and mithril fiber. Apart from the hat, he gave off the vibe that he could just about start screaming, “AAAMEN!” and hunting some vampires.

Holding his huge magic staff in one hand, Zelos headed back to Dandis.

“S-Sir Zelos... Are you intending to head off to battle?!”

“*That’s* the first thing you have to say?! Though, well... Yes, I suppose I *am* headed to battle, in a sense. I don’t want the duke’s wives making snide remarks at me from the sidelines, so I’ve tried to combine ‘formal’ with ‘intimidating’... Besides, I don’t have any actual suits.”

If Zelos *did* have a suit, he wouldn’t be wearing this sort of ominous equipment.

From the perspective of this world’s inhabitants, what Zelos was wearing seemed like battle gear taken to its extreme. In fact, his regular outfit was on the weaker side in comparison. After all, he hadn’t even enchanted it to hell and back.

Most things Zelos owned were on the crazy, dangerous end of the spectrum.

“What do you spend most of your time doing, if I may ask? From its appearance alone, I gather that this is a rather impressive set of armor...”

“Farming, mostly. Oh—speaking of which, do you need any eggs? I’ve got more than I can eat by myself.”

“We already have a supply of wild cocco eggs from a trusted farmer, so we are quite all right on that front. Perhaps you could consider sharing them with the nearby orphanage?”

“Hmm... Okay, then. I think I’ll swing by there on the way to meet the duke. Eggs are best eaten fresh, after all.”

Zelos’s house and the orphanage were essentially connected.

Their walls were just about touching, so you could get right from the back entrance of one to the other. Depending on how you looked at it, you could say it was an unsafe design, giving burglars the opportunity to get in from just about anywhere. That said, Zelos’s house had the ultimate, most terrifying security system imaginable. Any would-be burglars were doomed to get beaten up by a flock of militant chickens.

Carrying a bowl with the eggs from those very same chickens, Zelos made the short walk to the orphanage with Dandis.

He knocked lightly on the church's back door, and called out so he could be heard from inside.

"Luceris? Are you there?"

"Yes! Just give me a second, please. I'll unlock it now..."

Perhaps Luceris had already been nearby; she seemed to make her way to the door in no time at all. She unlocked the door, and opened it to greet Zelos.

"Um... You *are* Zelos... Yes?"

"I am... Does this outfit look weird on me, perhaps? Though I'm rather fond of the design, myself..."

"No, it suits you well. It just...makes you look like you're some sort of priest, is all. Though a bit more gaudy."

"A mage, looking like a priest... Anyway, these are some eggs my new chickens have laid. I won't be able to finish them all by myself, so I thought I'd share them."

"Is that really okay? Eggs are some very high-end ingredients! I'm sure you could get quite a lot of money if you sold these..."

"That doesn't really bother me. I'm not obsessed with money; if I really need some, I can always just go hunting in the Far-Flung Green Depths."

It would be quite the violent way of earning money. But it *would* be efficient; if all you wanted was to live an average life, you could get by for about a year by selling just seven palm-sized magic stones, or a couple more or less than that based on their quality.

And if *that* was all it took, Zelos would have no trouble at all earning himself a living. But still, he wanted to live a simple life, so he wasn't trying to do anything that'd make him stand out. It wasn't like he was a mercenary, so he wasn't drowning in work requests; about the most of it was that he'd have Hamber Construction trying to work him like a dog sometimes. Even then, their last job had earned him enough to easily get by for about half a year.

"We'd be more than happy to accept them, then. I'm sure the children will be thrilled."

“Ah... Yeah, I can just about hear them now, saying, ‘Gimme meat, Pops!’ All without a hint of shame...”

“As always, I’m so sorry about them... I really mustn’t be raising them right...”

“Don’t worry about it too much. I suppose it’s not a bad thing that they’re, uh, self-motivated. Even if those motivations are a little, well...”

The orphans here were doubtless putting in effort in order to have easy lives in the future.

But as children, their dreams were inherently materialistic, and they were incredibly frank about pursuing them.

Zelos’s only real worry was whether they might fail to reach those dreams and end up in a downward spiral.

“Hey, Lu... Can I get some water? Think I had too much to drink last night...”

“Oh, if it isn’t Jeanne! You’re looking awfully eye-catching for this time of day. Though I must say, it might be a little *too* exciting for an old man like me...”

“GYAAAH!”

Despite the fact that this was an orphanage, Jeanne, the mercenary, had just come out dressed in her underwear.

For Zelos—a bachelor who wasn’t used to women—it was a feast for the eyes. A sight more stimulating than he could handle.

She was, after all, in her underwear. And by the time Zelos had noticed her, it was already too late. She tried to cover herself with her hands, but it was useless. It only served to accentuate her body all the more, erotic enough to leave Zelos on the verge of a nosebleed.

Her breasts—they looked like about E cups—seemed almost radiant. It was a sight for sore eyes, and about the last thing Zelos had expected to see this morning.

“Hey, Jeanne, what’s— Oh. The Black Destroyer?!”

“Leave the nickname, please. I’m too old to be happy with a name like that...”

For some reason, Iris was here at the orphanage too. She’d always looked up

to the Destroyers; to her, they were almost like the equivalent of an idol group.

And now, a member of that group—the Black Destroyer—was right here in front of her.

“Are you going off to war or something, Mister? That’s some fancy gear you’re wearing!”

“Just some minor business, really. I’m only wearing it because I don’t have a suit. Anyway—why are you here at the church, Iris?”

“Aha ha ha... Well, we don’t have enough money for an inn right now, so Luceris is letting us stay here for a bit. The world’s a tough place...”

“Wouldn’t you be better off getting into a trade? Even just being able to create items is pretty valuable.”

Iris winced. “Uh... I’ve kinda always ignored the crafting stuff. I can’t actually make any potions or anything...”

Iris was more of a combat-specialized mage; she didn’t have any skills in crafting or anything. Sure, she’d decided on that because it was fun going out on adventures, but now that this was her *life*, she’d have a hard time putting food on the table through mercenary work alone.

It was a pretty unreliable situation to be in if she was going to keep on living in this world.

“Would you like me to teach you some basic crafting, then? If you start selling potions, I’m sure you’d at least be able to earn enough to pay for a room at an inn.”

“Really? Please! Yeah! Teach me! We’re *broke* right now!”

Based on the fact that Iris had no money, it seemed likely that her fellow party member, Jeanne, was equally broke.

Speaking of which, Jeanne was off hiding behind a wall at this point, crouching down, her face red. Apparently, being seen by Zelos had really embarrassed her.

“Did Mister see you looking like that, Jeanne?”

“Ah, to be young... To an old man like me, it was a sight for sore eyes, but I suppose it *could* have felt rather shameful for Jeanne herself! Really, though, what a cute lady...”

“Hyah?!”

“Uh, Mister... That’s sexual harassment, you know?”

“Legally, you can’t sue people for sexual harassment in this country. Besides, what happened was just an accident. I’m not at fault.”

Behind the wall, Jeanne was blushing harder and harder, her mood crashing with every passing moment.

She couldn’t stand how calm Zelos seemed to be after witnessing her in such an immodest state.

Her embarrassment stopping her from even voicing her anger, she was unable to do anything but sit there resenting him.

“Um, Zelos... Please don’t tease Jeanne too much. I know she looks like a bit of a tomboy, but she’s a very innocent girl on the inside.”

“See, that’s cute too... Anyway, back to the topic of the eggs—would you like me to cook you some now? As they are, they’ll only last for about twenty days or so.”

“Heh heh heh... No problem! I thought something like this might happen, so I bought myself a refrigerator! We should be able to keep fresh foods for a while now.”

“Did you get it from Solistia Trading? Because I’m the one who designed it for them, actually. I didn’t know they’d *already* be selling them... I guess I can never underestimate the duke.”

It had only been three weeks or so since Zelos had mentioned the fridges as an idea, yet it seemed like they were already on the market. Zelos couldn’t hide his amazement. The fridge design itself was simple enough, so it probably didn’t cost much to make, but even just gathering up enough of the magic stones that would serve as conduits to let the fridges make ice must have been quite the tall order. Zelos was kind of interested to hear how the duke had managed it.

“By the way, I can’t be here for long today, sorry; I have a meeting to get to. I’m curious, though—where are the kids? I don’t see them around.”

“Ange and the others are out cleaning up the town. They were saying something about wanting to save up every last bit of money they could so they can go out and buy mercenary equipment.”

“Tough kids, eh? If only their motivations weren’t so, well...”

The orphans were working hard toward their goals for the future, but the details of those goals made it all feel a little unfortunate, somehow.

It left Zelos and Luceris with some serious questions about child-rearing.

“Anyway, I’ll just leave the eggs here for now. I’ve got someone waiting for me, so I’ll take my leave, if you’ll excuse me. Ah—mind if I go through the church?”

“Of course you can. Thank you, as always. We’ll be able to look forward to some lovely meals now.”

“Aha ha—good to hear! Please enjoy them. Well, then, I’ll head through the church.”

Zelos passed through the middle of the church, heading to the carriage that was waiting for him out front.

Jeanne, meanwhile, shot straight into the room where the orphans slept, trying her best to hide from Zelos as he left.

Luceris saw him off, then headed to a closet to get a broom and start cleaning. Before she could, though, Jeanne called out to her.

“H-Hey, Lu... Do you, uh... Do you *like* that old geezer?”

“Wh-Wha—?!”

“Yeah, I thought so too,” Iris chimed in. “I mean, the way she looks at him’s almost like a newlywed wife looking at her husband. Is this your first love, Luceris?”

“N-Newlywed?! I’m... I wasn’t meaning to... A-And Jeanne, you’re interested in him as well, aren’t you?!”

“*Gwah?! I’m... I don’t really care about that kind of... And I mean, he’s old, and—*”

“Yeah—*you’re* interested in Mister too, aren’t you, Jeanne? You’re weirdly self-conscious around him. Besides, age is only a number, you know?”

“W-Wait! I’m not— It’s not like I’m—”

Both Luceris and Jeanne were conscious of him.

It was still only the faint beginning of a feeling, though. A burgeoning little something that was yet to develop into love.

Plus, the two young women hadn’t experienced first love before; they were both slow to recognize their own feelings.

Luceris, Jeanne, and Iris carried on with their girls’ talk, all in front of an altar for the gods.

There was something they were all forgetting, though. This world had a little phenomenon—both a blessing and a curse—commonly known as “love syndrome.” A phenomenon that essentially made people go into heat.

And you could never know when love syndrome was going to strike...

Chapter 16: The Old Guy Accepts a Personal Request

The duke's mansion was in the middle of Santor's new town area, and part of the premises were used as an office for Solistia Trading. Heading there from Zelos's house via the old town was a bit of a lengthy trip; you'd have a shorter route if you started from the separate castle where Creston, the former duke, spent his days. In fact, now that Zelos thought about it, it was only about a ten-minute walk from his house to Creston's castle. He wondered whether walking to the castle first and then taking a carriage from there would still be shorter than going through the old town.

The problem was, even if the old town route to the ducal residence was longer distancewise, it wouldn't take much more time if you were traveling by carriage. And then when you factored in the ten-minute walk along the forest path from Zelos's house to Creston's castle, it didn't really seem like one route would be quicker than the other. The only real difference was how soon you reached the new town area, where there was more pedestrian traffic—and once you needed to start dodging pedestrians, and carriages stopping on the road, that'd make up for any time you'd gained.

If you took the route from Creston's castle to the ducal residence, you'd have to go slowly along roads filled with carriages, and make a lot of turns at corners with busy intersections, each costing you time. Alternatively, if you went from the old town area, you could head there in just about a straight line along quiet roads. But in the end, they both worked out about the same. In this case, Zelos and Dandis would be taking the route through the old town. But that was only because Dandis had come from the ducal mansion via carriage, making it much easier to just take the fully paved road back.

As the carriage rolled along, Zelos looked through the window at the sights of the town. But he couldn't relax.

After all, however tasteful the carriage's interior design was, it was still the sort of carriage used by nobles. It was brimming with a sense of luxury, leaving

the lower-middle-class Zelos feeling rather out of place.

That was when he spotted someone he was familiar with. It was Lena, a member of the female mercenary party, coming out from an inn. For some reason, though, she was wearing a particularly refreshed, satisfied look on her face—and coming out behind her were five young, boyish-looking mercenaries, all seeming pitifully worn out.

It was hard to overlook the combination: Lena on the one hand, an arousing look of ecstasy on her face, and the mercenary boys on the other, exhausted and drained of all their energy but looking rather satisfied.

Lena... What have you been doing? Okay, well, I kind of have an idea, but why do you look so...radiant? And what happened to those boys to leave them that haggard?! You are a human, right? Not a vampire or a succubus or something?!

The last time Zelos had seen Lena was when they'd set out together for the wild conco request—though she'd disappeared en route the moment the others had taken their eyes off her, and he hadn't seen her since. She hadn't been at the orphanage this morning either.

Lena waved goodbye to the haggard boys and parted from them in front of the inn. She had a real skip in her step.

You had to imagine she'd "devoured" her companions. The mercenary boys, meanwhile, barely managed to walk a few steps before they collapsed, their bodies giving in. They had no strength left in their hips, by the looks of it. They must have had quite the night.

"I'm...just going to pretend I didn't see any of that."

"See what, Sir Zelos?"

It was still only morning, and Zelos had been reminded of just how little his common sense meant in this world, where polygamy (including polyandry) was accepted.

That the boys were working as mercenaries in the first place meant that they'd been recognized as adults by this world's standards.

Going by appearances, they were probably somewhere between thirteen and

fifteen. Old enough to be targets for all sorts of dangerous beasts—and as soon as you stepped out into the world as a mercenary, you were accepting all of the risks that could entail. This was a tough world; once you entered into society, you were responsible for whatever happened to you, even if you got caught up with an ill-natured prostitute or an individual with twisted tastes. There *were* laws for the protection of minors, but they were vague, undeveloped.

Zelos offered up a prayer of sympathy for the boys.

What he'd seen had left him feeling dreary, and he stayed that way for the rest of the carriage trip.

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"I have brought Sir Zelos, Your Grace."

"Good. Come in."

As Zelos entered the office, he saw Delthasis, the duke, engaged in a fierce battle with a bundle of paperwork.

All he was doing was passing his eyes over the mountain of documents and stamping them with his seal. But the rate at which he was doing so was insane—and in spite of that, it seemed like he was actually *comprehending* the contents of each document, moving any that he had a problem with into a separate pile.

Fortunately for Zelos, it seemed like the duke's wives weren't here right now.

"It's been a while, Your Grace. What business do you have with me today?"



“I have a request. You see, I’ve ended up with a bit of a thorny problem, and I’ve decided I should get the best expert I can think of to deal with it for me. Which would be you.”

“A request, you say...? I’m not sure I like where this is going.”

“Well, you’re right to feel that way. The Istol Academy of Magic is going to be sending students into the Ramaf Woods soon to get some combat experience, and to get straight to the point: I’d like to have you go along as a guard for Zweit.”

“Let’s hear the details. Since you’re asking me to be his *guard*, I’m getting the vibe that there might be some shady people up to no good behind the scenes...”

“Yes. Well, it’s a bit of a long story, but... Allow me to fill you in.”

The issue went back to when Zweit had returned to the academy.

A rift had formed within the Wiesler faction, which focused on researching magic-based national defense strategies—and which Zweit was a member of. On one side of this division was a group, centered around Zweit, that wanted to uphold the faction’s original ideals of researching military strategy. And on the other was a group of magic nobles, led by Samtrol, who were obsessed with their political ambitions, and focused on gathering up money behind closed doors and using it to coerce those around them.

Zweit had publicly blasted Samtrol’s political ambitions and naive strategies—in fact, that was what had made the rift in the faction begin to form in the first place. Then, when it became apparent that Samtrol’s side had been using brainwashing magic on the other students, the antagonism between the two sides had only intensified further.

The core of the issue was Samtrol, the leader of the opposing group. He was the second son of Marquess Wiesler, but he was badly behaved, and he seemed to be flat-out repudiating his very own family’s emphasis on using magic-centric strategies for national defense.

While there *were* some who were willing to denounce him face-to-face, he was able to abuse his family’s influence to silence them—and he’d usually then

begin harassing them in all sorts of nasty ways too. Frankly, it was making him a thorn in the academy's side. That was true even for others in the same faction as him—and while his lineage had given him an easy path to being a representative of one of the factions within the academy, that status was now on shaky ground.

“Has the Wiesler house just been quiet about it? He's—that 'thumb troll' guy, or whatever he's called—he's part of their family, isn't he?”

“‘Samtrol,’ you mean. The Wiesler house has given us permission to punish him as we see fit. As you might expect, they seem to have grown rather fed up with the need to keep dealing with all the complaints about him. From what I hear, they should be disowning him soon.”

“Ah... So *now* they're deciding he's gone too far? Now that he's starting to be a bother to the people in his own house too?”

“Yes—it's certainly taken them long enough. The boy's always been a fool convinced he's a genius. Ever quick to form a grudge against anyone who disagrees with him in the slightest. Nothing but a worm capable of using underhanded tactics. Nobody will care if we crush him.”

“Even his own family's abandoning him... So, what, he's just some idiot nobody likes?”

The Wiesler house had strong ties with the Order of Knights, and it was one of the leading houses in the country when it came to military defense. But now, there was someone from that house getting obsessed with the notion that he came from a superior pedigree, and he'd banded together with like-minded companions and started going out of control. Now, other nobles who shared his views were joining him too, turning the whole situation into more and more of a mess. And to top it all off, they'd started working with a shady organization to dip their hands into crime.

The Wiesler house itself was relatively decent, and those nobles who *were* obsessed with their pedigree weren't thought of particularly well. It was, after all, a historically meritocratic family, willing to cut off even its own family members without mercy if they proved to be incompetent.

The only reason Samtrol hadn't yet been thrown away in spite of that was

that his mother was from a powerful family—too powerful to simply ignore. It was hard to just cut him off without considering the consequences.

Now, though, things had changed. Largely because of the surge in the Solistia faction's influence—and the one leading that surge was Delthasis, the very man Zelos was face-to-face with. He was working hard to financially destroy those who got in his way, both openly and behind the scenes, while also bringing any talented individuals over to his own side with suitable pay. What was more, the trading company he'd started as something of a hobby was quite profitable by this point, helping to make the Solistia faction more affluent than the others; that certainly helped.

Any factions he had a problem with were struggling more and more and more to finance themselves, and so there was no end of mages around town who were leaving those factions and shifting their loyalties to the Solistia faction. Magic research inevitably required funding, and Delthasis had distinct departments for both researching magic and dispatching mages; he seemed to be an efficient manager.

Mages couldn't even research properly unless they were part of a faction. And if they joined the up-and-coming *Solistia* faction, they'd have the opportunity to carry out research and use their magic with relative freedom. It was no surprise that a slew of mages were betraying their former factions to sign up.

By this point, the greedy individuals throwing around the name of the Wiesler faction were struggling to secure enough funds to even keep the faction running—which only made it harder for them to convince their large roster of members to stay. It was like they were dancing in the palm of the duke's hand.

Mages were only human, after all. They needed money to live. And if they stayed with the current-day Wiesler faction, they'd have a hard time getting it.

The Saint-Germain faction, at least, was doing well enough. It was able to earn its own money by researching and making potions, and all of its mages were researchers.

But the Wiesler faction, which had essentially been taking capital by force, was struggling to cover its basic operating expenses now. It didn't really have

the leeway to properly look after its members. And since Zweit had set out to reform the faction, the only members left were those who were obsessed with the superiority of their bloodlines. All those members were nobles, and ultimately, they were far more interested in abusing the authority of their family names than in actually earning themselves any funding. It was only a matter of time until they fell into ruin.

“Okay. I think I get the gist of it now. The magic noble supremacists probably think they’ll be able to mount a comeback if they can get rid of Zweit, yes? And so they’ve decided to scrounge up what little money they have left and get a crime syndicate they’re familiar with to send an assassin after him—is that right?”

“Yes. Fools are always a pain to deal with. If only they’d learned to be satisfied with what they already have... But no. They’ve had a taste of power, and now they’re addicted to it. And it seems like that’s sent them running to a certain crime syndicate: Hydra.”

“‘Hydra’? Don’t tell me—it’s got multiple leaders or something? You cut off one head, and two more just pop up to replace it?”

“Exactly that. They’re a difficult bunch to deal with. I’ve been up against them since my younger days, and I’ve taken out maybe ten of their leaders. But the group refuses to just stay down. Even after I’ve won over more than half their members, and more from other groups, they— *Ahem!* Forget I said that.”

“So you’ve been fighting against this criminal organization ever since you were younger? Uh... Tell me, what does your average schedule look like? That doesn’t exactly sound like how a duke would spend his time.”

As always, Delthasis was an enigma. And to nobody’s surprise, he merely waved away Zelos’s question with a vague, “Life needs its spice, you know.” Perhaps the duke actively *enjoyed* spending his days fighting underground organizations.

“Anyway, you’ve sprung this whole request on me pretty suddenly. What gives?”

“A black marketeer in competition with Hydra was eliminated a few days ago. His room was locked, and based on the faint traces of mana remaining in his

room, it's suspected that the killer used Shadow Dive."

Shadow Dive was a skill used by assassins, allowing them to move about while hiding in the shadows. Mages capable of dark magic could do the same thing, and it went by the same name, but it was a little different. Still, what both had in common was that they couldn't get through magical walls or barriers; the technique wasn't omnipotent.

Generally, the average person's residence wouldn't be protected by a barrier or anything of the sort, and so if they wanted to protect themselves from such incursions, they'd have no choice but to rely on a magic tool. Which meant the Istol Academy of Magic could be infiltrated from any angle.

"Now, I don't expect them to actually try to infiltrate the academy itself. Nobles are always carrying around magic tools with the ability to deploy barriers. Trying to infiltrate the academy for an assassination would be too risky."

"And so they're going to wait for some kind of event outside of the academy... Is that what you're saying? Sounds like your son's ended up in the sights of a rather troublesome enemy, eh?"

"The academy gets knights and mercenaries to go along to the combat training camp as guards. The knights are one thing, but there's no telling whether one of the mercenaries could secretly be an assassin. Which is why we need a skilled guard to go along."

"I wouldn't mind taking part as a mercenary, but...is there any guarantee I'll actually be assigned to guard Zweit?"

"No, all we can do about that is lodge a request. We can't go as far as actually giving the academy an order. If we need to, we can get help from others we can trust as well. I'm willing to pay for a formal request."

Zelos was troubled. If he was going to be participating as a mercenary, it was likely he'd be separated from the person he needed to guard at some point. And if that was going to be the case, he'd need to think of some other solutions.

I wonder if I should make some kind of magic tool that lets people alert me to an emergency... And I think I'll bring those three birds with me. They can take

out stone golems in one hit—and what's more important is that they'll be leagues ahead of the other mercenaries.

Zelos was running through a number of possible ideas in his head, beginning to put together a plan for foiling any would-be assassins.

"It sounds like you're willing to take this on, I gather?"

"Well, they *are* going after a student of mine. I can't exactly say no..."

"Then I leave my son in your hands."

"I'll try to make a few things that could be useful before we go. Still—while I'll do as much as I can, I can't *guarantee* I'll be able to stop them."

"That's all I can ask. Anyway, I'm curious... Did you come here prepared for *battle* today? That equipment of yours seems quite extravagant..."

"Everyone's been saying that. The thing is, I just don't have any formal wear, unfortunately. This was about the closest thing I had."

Zelos's armor really *did* stand out. He might have looked like a mage, but his gear was a terrifying masterpiece. Coming dressed like that to meet a duke was almost like making a declaration of war against him.

Zelos was starting to seriously think about getting himself a suit.

"I see... Well, I'd like you to go wearing that when you're on guard duty. If our opponents know there's such a powerful man around, they'll hesitate to do anything rash. It could help to discourage them."

"Er... D-Do you mind if I hide my face? I'd rather not stand out too much, is all."

Delthasis blinked, taking a moment to respond. "Isn't it a bit too late for that? Though I'll leave the choice to you, I suppose."

"When is this combat training camp supposed to start?"

"Two weeks from now. Though I'd like you to head to the academy a few days in advance. You should be able to get there quickly if you go by ship."

"Understood. I'll head back now and start preparing, then. Fortunately, I happen to know some mercenaries with time on their hands as well."

And so Zelos began preparing for his job as a guard.

It *did* sound like it was going to be a pain, but he would've felt ashamed of himself if he'd simply abandoned Zweit.

"By the way, how are you getting inside information about the academy? Are you sending in spies in disguise or something?"

"It's...best that you don't know. For your own sake. That's not a world you want to step into unless you're mentally prepared."

It didn't seem like Delthasis was going to give him an answer. From what the duke was saying, though, Zelos at least figured the man was sending in his own spies and having them operate behind the scenes. It gave Zelos a renewed understanding that the duke was a dangerous man—one that he absolutely did *not* want as an enemy. As well as an understanding that there would be no ally more reassuring to have...

A proper gentleman had to have his secrets. At any rate, though, it seemed like Zelos would be meeting up with his student again.

Starting this day, Zelos began creating items to protect Zweit. Though, of course, he got carried away as he went, and ended up making some entirely unnecessary things as well. The Black Destroyer was a crafter through and through.

As a side note, that same Black Destroyer made sure to buy himself some soy sauce, miso, and vinegar from Solistia Trading while he was there.

Tamari soy sauce, specifically. He was told it paired well with the rich taste of cocco eggs.

All that was left now was to get himself some sake and some mirin—though he didn't know how to go about making the latter.

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Winding back the clock...

A woman wearing a hooded cloak that hid her face went down a back alley and stepped into a run-down tavern.

Sharing drinks inside was a group of boorish-looking men who didn't look like

the sorts to hold down regular jobs.

A vulgar grin spread across their faces when they saw the woman...but they were stopped by the owner pouring their drinks behind the bar. A quick word of warning was enough for them to turn pale and let the woman pass without issue.

The woman headed to the back of the tavern, where she pulled a lever hidden next to a cabinet of drinks.

There was a sound of something sliding out of place—and then the cabinet started slowly moving forward. It was a secret door.

The woman descended down a staircase set behind the cabinet, taking a path that led farther underground.

This was part of a city that had once been aboveground. But it had been buried with time, gradually becoming a forgotten ruin as a new city was built on top. And ruins like that were frequently turned into strongholds for criminal syndicates.

As the woman headed down a path lit by magic lamps, she reached a particular ruin that was once the mansion of a merchant from an era long gone. Now, it housed the woman's employer.

She tentatively opened the door, and saw a number of men inside.

Or rather, most of them were too young to be called men. By their looks, the woman figured they were naive boys from rich families. After a quick glance at the boys, she walked toward a man in a suit sitting across from them at a table and snuggled against his back.

His suit was such a gaudy purple that you'd struggle to call it tasteful, even if you were *trying* to praise it. Around his fingers were several rings inlaid with eye-catching jewels, while a gold necklace hung around his neck.

This was clearly no upstanding member of society. He was a head figure in the underworld.

"Talking with some guests of yours, darling? They seem awfully young, though..."

“You’re back. So. How’d it go?”

“Oh, it was *easy*. How’d your men ever struggle against someone like *that* in the first place?”

“Good. I knew I could trust you. That’s one less eyesore we have to worry about now. Should give us a monopoly on the market for a while.”

“Aha ha ha... Lovely. It sounds like we should have *plenty* of money coming in, then.”

The man reached out a hand toward the woman and lovingly stroked her bare skin.

One of the young men hit the table with a loud thump, clearly annoyed by the pair’s chat. It seemed less like he was quick-tempered, though, and more like he simply refused to accept being ignored.

“We were *talking*. So? Are you going to take the job? Tell me already!”

“If you want a job done, *boy*, you need to learn to act like an adult. But yes, as long as you’ve got the money, we can deal with anyone you want. So—who are we gonna be killing?”

“It’s this guy. We could be running into some problems soon... I want him dealt with while we can.”

The young man placed a photograph on the table.

“Photograph” in this instance referred to a particularly detailed picture created by using a magic tool to reproduce the target’s likeness on paper.

But whatever you called it, it was accurate enough that this one depiction would be more than enough to identify a person.

“Oh? Handsome, isn’t he? Aww, what is it, boy—did he steal your first love from you?”

“Stop calling me ‘*boy*’! And what he *did* shouldn’t matter—your job is just to do what you’re told and kill him for me!”

“Watch your mouth, boy. Remember, we don’t *have* to take the job. I hear your faction’s been real down in the dumps lately. They say you’re flat out of

cash.”

“Ugh...”

“Well, that’s your problem, not ours. Anyway, don’t forget—we’re only willing to deal with kids like you as thanks to a middleman of ours who’s treated us good.”

It looked like this man was several steps ahead of his guests. He already knew their background, their secrets; simply disclosing a little information here and there was enough for him to make it entirely clear who had the upper hand in this transaction.

The young clients would be in a tough spot if the man didn’t accept the job. They had no choice but to stay silent.

“Anyway... So you want us to take out the son of the Silent Lion, huh? That’s a pain of a target you’ve given us.”

“Oh. Is the boy in this picture really that famous?”

“His old man’s the famous one. He crushed more than half our organization. And now it looks like he’s out to crush the Wiesler faction too... He’s a tough one.”

“Wha—?! There’s no way the head of a ducal family would be doing something like...”

“Shut it, brat. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Keep your yapping mouth out of it.”

The young client was silenced by the contempt dripping from the man’s words.

At one point, this crime syndicate—Hydra—had been just a step away from having the entire underworld of Solistia under its thumb. But a single man had driven the group to the brink of destruction.

The group had tried time and time again to have him killed, but not only had it wound up with its *own* leaders dead instead, but the duke had also brought most of the group’s personnel over to his own side. The man here knew—this latest target’s father was a terribly dangerous individual.

The duke had a knack for operating without letting his foes catch wind of anything, and it had earned him a nickname in the underworld: the Silent Lion.

Eventually, that nickname had made its way into regular society too, leaving Delthisis known as the Silent Lion, the Silent Duke, and the Lady-Killer Supreme. That last nickname was one he'd been given by other men with more than a tinge of envy, referring to how he could just sit there silently drinking alcohol and women would come up to him all by themselves.

"Honestly, I was amazed he actually became duke... The guy might look quiet, but he's more of a villain than we are. I thought it was a joke or something, first time I heard it. *No way a maniac like that'd cut it as a noble*, I thought."

"What a lovely little story. Oh, it gives me the shivers...≡"

"The man's a force to be reckoned with. If he's on the move, your faction's as good as done for. Just give up."

The young men were lost for words. It sounded like even if they killed the duke's son, they'd have to contend with the full might of his father next.

And even *they* were aware that they'd be sorely out of their depth in a conflict against the kind of monster that had managed to obliterate the biggest power in the underworld. The duke was dangerous enough that, worst-case scenario, he could end up completely destroying not only their faction but their families too.

"Well, whatever. We'll take your request. *You're* the ones he'll end up going for, after all."

"N-No... Uh, we're..."

"You seriously think you can just back out this late into the game? I can just about guarantee, the guy already knew what you're up to before you even stepped foot in here. He's not just good at using people—he's happy to get his own hands dirty too, if he has to. And in a real dangerous way. He's not the kind of man you want as your enemy..."

The young men were very quickly learning what it felt like to fall into despair. They'd gone past the line, and it was too late to turn back.

If they wanted to stay alive at this point, they'd have no choice but to eliminate everyone who stood against them. Failing that, they'd never be able to sleep easy again.

They'd taken step after step into danger, never quite realizing what they were getting themselves into, and only now were they being informed that they'd made an enemy of just about the last man they should. It was only fair that they'd been insulted by being called *boys*—they were such naive fools that they might as well have still been infants.

“Well, if we deal with the target, we'll be able to get revenge on *that* bastard too. And all the blame will fall on our little squad of boys here. No skin off *our* backs.”

“Oh? Are we going to accept the job, then, darling?”

“We are. Mind taking on another job, Sharanla? The boys here'll get everything ready for you.”

“Oh, I suppose I'll have to. I'll do it—for you. But once I'm done, I'll have you buy me all sorts of things, okay?”

“Sure. I'll buy you whatever you want. You're my little good luck charm; that's the least I can do.”

The die was cast. The naive young men had just wanted to get rid of a nuisance, but now they'd found out there was a much bigger threat lurking behind him than they'd ever expected. The leader of the young men—Samtrol—couldn't stop himself from trembling. His posse was finally beginning to realize what fools they'd been. But it was too late to turn back.

It was their own recklessness that had gotten them into this mess, and whether the assassination succeeded or failed, they'd ultimately end up in the same spot.

Nonetheless, Samtrol decided to keep struggling in vain. It was almost commendable, for a scoundrel like him.

Chapter 17: The Old Guy Becomes One with the Wind

Transmutation was an almost secret technique that lay right at the heart of crafting, only usable by those who had reached certain heights in the Blacksmith, Alchemist and Apothecary jobs.

By putting materials in the middle of the sigil and inputting the transmutation process while supplying it with mana, you could create all sorts of different things; it was a convenient application of magic. Still, though, it wasn't as if you could make absolutely *anything* with it. The ability to skip over steps like compounding and manufacturing was valuable, but transmutation didn't have a very high success rate, and the items created with it would inevitably be of lower quality than those made by hand.

Whether they were weapons, potions, or something else—sure, they'd be effective enough, but if you wanted them to be comparable to their handmade equivalents, you'd have to transmute a *lot* of items. It was similar to how a blacksmith had to make weapons over and over again to improve their skills, or how an alchemist had to spend a huge amount of time and effort on compounding; you wouldn't be able to make high-quality items through transmutation unless you'd made countless items before for practice.

That was just as true in this world as it had been in the digital world; most likely, about the only ones actually capable of making high-quality items through transmutation were elves who'd holed themselves up inside the Far-Flung Green Depths.

Even ignoring quality, though, there were so few people capable of transmutation that you'd have an easy time counting them. And anyone who *was* able to use it would be recognized as a mage of legendary skill.

Regardless of whether all they could make with it were shabby excuses for items.

Yet despite all that, there was someone here who was able to manipulate that ultimate technique as he wished. And that someone was an average-looking middle-aged guy...

“All right—the spellseal stone’s good to go. Now just to *compress* that stone, and...”

A spellseal stone was a magic stone with a magic formula etched inside it.

Sealing a magic formula inside a magic stone involved the same process as a mage learning a spell. The only difference was whether you etched that spell into the depths of your subconscious, or a magic stone. Apart from that, it was the same process, so it wasn’t labor-intensive. But you did have to create that magic formula at the preparation stage, and *that* part required some handiwork.

Fortunately for Zelos, he still had all of the magic formulas and item recipes he’d created back in *Swords & Sorceries* stored inside his mind, so he was able to extract that information whenever he needed it and use it for production.

Now that he’d reincarnated, and all of his character’s data had been materialized within his body, he was capable of all of the things his character had learned in-game. Maybe you could say that was enough to class his techniques as cheats, but those techniques were things that he’d worked hard to learn and polish as a player; he *had* still shed blood, sweat, and tears to get to where he was, in a sense. And in this world, where your personal level and your job skill levels automatically compensated for your movements to make you better at things, you could argue that Zelos’s “cheats” here were simply the result of his diligent level-grinding back on Earth.

If he’d been born in this world to begin with, it would’ve been an amazing achievement; something to be truly proud of. But Zelos, who’d “achieved” all that in another world—and by playing a game, to boot—felt like there was nothing to be proud of in the slightest. Still, all his trial and error in the digital world was undeniably something he’d experienced. It was just that the matter of what counted as “real” for him, and what didn’t, had been flipped on its head when he’d been reincarnated.

And there was no denying that he’d slain countless monsters, and used

various materials to make all sorts of different items.

Of course, having been able to do that in a virtual world where he couldn't die was a big advantage. But even then, the penalty for reincarnating in the game had been weirdly harsh; your stats would drop, and you wouldn't be able to move like usual for a full few weeks.

That "few weeks" *did* refer to in-game time, not Earth time. But even then, the penalty for dying had been so harsh that most players had dealt with it by playing as safely as they could.

After all, simulation or no, most players were afraid of death.

Behavior in the vast world of *Swords & Sorceries* hadn't been all that different to behavior here, where knights and mages alike made sure to form strategies before they mobilized. Whichever of the two worlds you were in, death could always be lurking right around the next corner.

Sure, there were *some* differences—reality here didn't include gacha mechanics, for one—but the point was, the time Zelos had spent in the game had been unmistakably *real*. He had no reason to be so harsh on himself for how he'd gotten his abilities. It was just a matter of whether he could accept that fact, and that choice was in his own hands.

Frankly, Zelos had *already* come to accept it to some extent. Since his reincarnation, he'd been forced to think time and time again about the relationship between his three worlds—Earth, the in-game world of *Swords & Sorceries*, and this new world he'd reincarnated into—and he'd inevitably started seeing all the things he'd done in-game not as actions in some virtual space, but as time spent in what was just another reality. In fact, he was wondering whether this world he was in now might actually be the *third* world he'd lived in.

He continued to muse over all that as he crafted in silence.

The real hassle with this whole process was the preparation before the transmutation itself: the creation of spellseal stones.

He could just take scrolls he'd already made and use those for the process of etching the magic formulas, so that part wasn't too bad. The problem was the

compression of the spellseal stones.

Magic stones were formed when mana condensed and turned into a mineral. But when their mana was all used up, they turned into something like clear glass before eventually shattering. They ended up fading away, unable to even keep their form.

To stop that from happening, you could combine and compress two magic stones of the same type, resulting in a single stone that would be able to hold more mana while also being stronger. And if you first etched a magic formula into multiple magic stones that were to serve as the core of some item, and *then* combined those stones together, you'd be left with one, large spellseal stone. At that point, you could also further compress the stone to make it smaller, which would increase its effectiveness by leaps and bounds.

If there was any problem, it was that the magic formula tended to get warped when you compressed the stone, sometimes leaving it unable to maintain its effect. But a good crafter could find ways of getting around that.

And Zelos was very used to this work. He'd made so many spells and items, and become capable of some impressively intricate tasks—that was how he'd been able to acquire the Great Sage job skill. And it seemed like the techniques he'd cultivated in-game were fully available to him in this world too.

"It's strange, if you really think about it. Leveling up here makes you physically stronger, and it makes you better at retaining information; that much is clear, from the people I've come across since I reincarnated. But it's weird that the techniques I learned in the game are so similar to the ones used here. Could it be that— No, surely not..."

As Zelos thought back on things, a number of oddities stood out to him.

Take item creation, for example. Sure, *Swords & Sorceries* had been a particularly detailed virtual reality world that the player could interact with using their five senses. But the way that you'd really been able to *feel* making something in the game—or, if things went badly, a different sensation of *failing* to make that thing—had been incredibly realistic. It was almost as if you'd actually been crafting things yourself. That was part of what had really gotten people interested and absorbed in the game.

But ever since he'd left Earth, Zelos was constantly getting some kind of sense that something was *off* about the similarities between the game world and this world, especially when he was crafting items.

That sense of unease stemmed from something like this: could you really create such a detailed, intricate world within a program, using the technology that existed on Earth?

The world within the game—the world of Franlidhe—worked almost the same as this world Zelos was in now, barring a few of the laws of nature here. It'd be weirder if he *didn't* find anything strange about that. And if this world's setting and most of its laws of nature *were* the same as those from the game, it grew harder and harder to believe that the game and its world had actually been fiction.

If it turned out that the “fictional” game world of Franlidhe had actually been some kind of reality, it wouldn't be all that much of a stretch to suppose that the players' human bodies had been reconstructed based on their characters in that world when they'd died. After all, the game *had* included resurrection as a mechanic.

While players would incur a heavy stat debuff as a penalty for dying, they *would* be revived. Albeit, they'd lose their items and any experience they'd earned in the area where they died; in the worst-case scenario, they could lose some very rare gear. In reality, meanwhile, there was no coming back from the dead. But it wasn't unthinkable that a person on the verge of death on Earth could be somehow merged with a game character that aligned with this world's rules of nature, opening up the possibility for their reincarnation here.

Outside of that, it was hard to think of any way the players could've been reincarnated so smoothly and easily. The theory technically made sense; all that remained was to use some kind of matter to recreate the bodies of those who had died back on Earth.

“This is the kind of thing you see all the time in anime or light novels, but...was the game I played seriously based on this world? *Why*, though? Even if it was technically possible to do something like that, would *humans* have been able to do it? Surely not, if you think about it...”

The only ones who would be capable of getting information about another world in the first place would be the beings referred to as “gods.” But there was no knowing whether those were the same gods that people believed in. All that *was* clear was that they were capricious beings with too much time on their hands—though Zelos was able to at least speculate a little about the world of the gods to some extent based on his situation. Which is to say, considering the laws of nature, things were probably pretty strained up there for the gods to have resorted to reincarnating the dead.

And if Zelos’s hypothesis was correct, it would only reinforce the idea that the world of *Swords & Sorceries*, too, was ultimately not a game. That the world people had *thought* was a game was, in fact, a proper, other world made by the gods, and that the gaming console known as DreamTech had been a medium capable of transferring a player’s soul into their character, allowing them to come and go between worlds whenever they played. All of that would also help explain why there hadn’t been any questions about the whole thing until now. If people’s very minds had been tinkered with by the gods, it suddenly made much more sense that nobody had found the game and the circumstances surrounding it to be strange.

As far as Zelos could reason, *Swords & Sorceries* was just far too elaborate to be a game you could put together using technology from Earth. You could have as many supercomputers as you wanted, each with spectacular data processing capabilities, and you still wouldn’t be able to process enough data to run a world like that. Even the NPCs in the game had had free will, just like the players. Even supposing a world like that *had*, theoretically, been contained within a program at first, the constant buildup of data would’ve only ramped up to more and more insane heights with time, eventually bringing the program to breaking point, unable to process it all. The electricity consumption would’ve been enormous too; there was no way the supply side could have kept up.

Though, well, this was all still just Zelos’s theory. There was no telling whether he was right or not.

“Either way, I guess the Dark God’s existence must’ve been outside the scope of what the gods running the game world were expecting... If you think about it, they had some god from another world foisted onto them without them even

realizing, and it started to have a negative impact on the world they were managing themselves. Pretty sure they'd want to complain about that, huh..."

Zelos was going by his knowledge from light novels here, but without any concrete proof, it was nothing but wild conjecture. Still, based on the message he'd been sent by one of the four so-called goddesses of this world, they seemed like a truly irresponsible, pleasure-seeking lot. It made it hard for Zelos to think that he was necessarily wrong.

The sight of Zelos muttering to himself, lost deep in thought about it all, was a bit of a creepy one. Still, he made sure to keep up preparing for his crafting as he went.

"Now, then... That's the preparations done. Let's get to actually *making* some stuff, shall we?"

His mind might have been whirring into overdrive with all his theories, but he was still crafting without rest.

For now, he was making rings. Equipping *too* many things to your fingers could get to be a hassle, though. So for the next thing he was making—a defensive magic tool—he decided to go with an amulet that could be worn around the neck.

He still had plenty of materials from his trip to the abandoned mine. So while he was at it, he figured he'd also make copies of the same items for Celestina, and for Delthasis's second son, Croesus, who Zelos was yet to meet.

Judging by the report Zelos had gotten from Croesus, at least, he figured the boy was quite the passionate researcher. He felt like the two of them might be able to really get along.

Getting everything prepared for transmutation was quite the hassle, but once you had that out of the way, the rest was pretty easy. You just had to place the materials on top of the sigil and operate it. And the pieces of equipment he was making were essentially just inferior versions of things he'd made before, so the process would take no time at all. Once he'd gotten everything set up, he was rather suddenly left with some free time.

"Okay, I've got a bunch of time on my hands now, huh... That was quicker

than expected. What next?”

Zelos’s skills were already in the realm of an absolute master. He was frighteningly quick at making things from scratch.

Repair work involved all sorts of little tasks that were a hassle, so it wasn’t the kind of thing he usually did. But actually *creating* things like this was something he was good at. And the same excitement he’d felt when making items in the game still lingered now—so leaving it at just this would’ve felt very anticlimactic for him. Above all, though, he had the bad tendency to get very carried away when he did work like this. And so he got started on making some completely unrelated things too, just to pass the time.

He ended up so absorbed in indulging his hobbies that he kept up his work for three days straight.

*

It was about three days since Zelos had started preparing for his job as a guard.

Iris was looking over the notice board at the mercenaries’ guild, trying to see if there were any decent requests to take on.

But all of them were for faraway places, and they were the sort of requests that seemed likely to leave the party in the red to boot. If the party wanted any chance of paying their living expenses through one of these requests, they’d probably need to take on others in the same area while they were at it. But then if they did that, it seemed unlikely they’d be able to get the initial request completed by the deadline.

Plus, taking on long-distance requests would require hiring a carriage—not to mention costs for lodging and food along the way—right when Iris and her party were already struggling for money. They were a low-ranked party, and their living expenses would bleed them dry of money before they even got to where they needed to be. Even budgeting it all out, it was clear that the slightest increase in their living expenses would leave them completely unable to stay at an inn. And the party would rather avoid camping out in the wild while they were on the job.

“*Aaah...* There’s nothing good here. I should’ve taken some crafting skills...”

The party’s financial situation was dire.

Since Zelos and Kaede had ultimately been the ones to resolve the wild conco issue, Iris, Jeanne, and Lena hadn’t earned so much as a single coin from it. What was more, seeing as the client had paid out the reward to two people who weren’t even mercenaries, Iris and her allies had ultimately failed the request. They were seen as being no different from all the other mercenaries who’d taken on the job only to have the tables turned on them by the ferocious chickens.

The party had been living out of inns, but these past three days, they’d been relying on the orphanage to take care of them; it was only thanks to the kindness of Zelos and Luceris that they were getting food shared with them. All they were doing with themselves was popping into the guild every day to look through the board of job requests and try to find something that worked for them.

Luceris earned an income by healing the sick and injured for cheap on the side of her work looking after the kids at the church that served as an orphanage; Zelos, despite largely being unemployed, somehow seemed to have no issues with money, to the extent that he could lazily brush the matter off with a confident, “Well, if I *do* ever need money, I can always just go hunting.” Besides, he was self-sufficient, so he didn’t have to worry about going hungry in the first place.

Iris had been expecting an exciting fantasy world, but she was being forced to contend with cold, hard reality.

“Who knows *when* I’ll get to try and conquer a dungeon at this rate...” She sighed.

By this world’s standards, Iris was strong. But her allies—Lena and Jeanne—were weaker than she was. While it wasn’t like your effectiveness was determined entirely by your level, it certainly didn’t hurt to have better physical abilities.

Jeanne was too careful; when it came to subjugation requests, she tended to choose relatively weak monsters. Lena, meanwhile, *seemed* like she’d be a

reliable ally, but she had a habit of going off the rails in certain situations; one moment she'd be there, the next gone.

And when she eventually returned, her skin was always glowing for some reason, her face satisfied.

At this rate, it didn't seem like they'd be getting much stronger anytime soon. And especially when they kind of knew a guy with insane cheat abilities, the idea of getting serious about improving as mercenaries felt kind of pointless in comparison.

But even if Iris was to go off hunting monsters by herself, she couldn't even take apart the bodies alone. She'd decided on her build with *adventuring* in mind; taking apart dead bodies wasn't part of that. She didn't have the skill for it, and even if she did, she doubted she'd be able to do it. She was starting to get bothered by the gap between the game and reality—and by how her decisions in the former were affecting the latter.

“One way or another, I guess Mister was kinda being realistic, huh? Compared to him, I'm just...”

Zelos had already gotten himself a plot of land and a house, and as of late, he was self-sufficient too. From a certain perspective, you could say he was doing a good, proactive job of planning out a realistic life and working toward it. Whatever flaws he had, the fact that he was managing to get by in one way or another meant he was successful. Iris, in contrast, was on the verge of being completely destitute any day now.

Requests were a mercenary's lifeblood, and it was only high-level mercenaries—and even then, only those who could be relied on to return good results—who received enough earnings from them to make a decent living.

The higher your rank as a mercenary, the better-paying requests you could take on...though of course, those requests were harder to complete too. Iris might have been powerful as a mage, but she was still barely even a novice as a mercenary, and her inability to strip useful materials from any monsters she defeated was a fatal flaw. She could just barely get by on that front with help from Lena and Jeanne, but *without* those two there to help her out, she was practically useless, however strong she was.

She sighed again. “This is so depressing... I’m in a whole other world, and it turns out it’s almost the same as Earth! I guess I don’t have a choice—I’ll have to ask Mister to teach me how to be an alchemist or an apothecary. I mean, he *did* say he’d do that for me...”

It had taken a while, but Iris had finally awakened to reality. Even if the environment she was in was something like medieval Europe, it was ultimately her new reality—and in reality, you had to work if you wanted to live. The mercenary lifestyle wasn’t cheap either: on top of your living expenses, you had to worry about upkeep for things like your weapons and armor. At the very least, it couldn’t hurt to have a side hustle.

This wasn’t some game, where you could never eat and still be perfectly fine.

Iris had been longing for a life of excitement, but she’d been forced to learn that, fantasy world or not, this was reality. Dispirited, she started making her way over to Zelos’s house.

*

Iris had arrived at the front of Zelos’s house.

The chickens were doing their kumite and kata training in the field near the house. Iris still didn’t know what exactly it was that these odd creatures were trying to accomplish; all she *did* know was that they were preparing to go and meet stronger foes in the future. But these birds were already strong enough to soundly defeat mercenaries—and they had the unusual custom of obeying the strong, and the strong only. Perhaps it was only natural, then, that they were happy to follow Zelos, who was *overwhelmingly* strong.

They made for excellent stay-at-home security guards too. Any would-be burglar who came unprepared would very quickly find themselves beaten to a pulp.

After all, their former owner had been a Level 200 mercenary at one point, an A-rank in the mercenaries’ guild. Sparring with someone like that day in and day out would obviously make you stronger, whether you wanted to be or not. There was no rule that said you could only level up by going out and fighting things to the death.

Iris tapped lightly on Zelos's door.

"Heeeeeey, Mister? You there? It's Iris..."

"Yes, I'm here. You can come in. I've just got my hands full at the moment, is all..."

It sounded like Zelos was working on something. Iris was hesitant to come in if he was really that busy—but her livelihood was at stake here. If she didn't do something, she'd never be able to fulfill her dreams of going dungeon-delving.

She opened the door with an, "Okay, then—coming in," and headed straight to the workshop area of Zelos's house. But when she arrived, she saw him making something that looked decidedly...un-fantasy-like.

Specifically, there was something that seemed like an engine, and it was fitted to a metal frame. Scanning her eyes around, she saw all sorts of parts scattered around the floor, as well as a couple of wheels. And then, she realized what he was making:

A motorbike.

It looked like an off-road motorbike at first glance, but the wheels were large, and the frame itself—perhaps because it didn't have any of the finishing touches—looked rather crude. At the same time, though, some of the parts attached to it looked like magic tools.

It was clearly at least a thousand cubic centimeters big. The exterior parts didn't even return an item name if you tried to appraise them, but judging by their looks, they were probably made from some type of dragon carapace.

The whole thing had a wicked-looking, jet-black appearance. Once it was finished, it was probably going to look like something that would make a dramatic entrance when a certain rider called for it while transforming.

At any rate, Zelos was doing an impressive job of ruining the whole fantasy vibe of the world.

"Uh... Mister? Why are you making a motorbike?"

"Thought it might come in handy. So I figured I'd just make one to my tastes. I used to tinker with bikes with Ichinose, who lived nearby, so I remember how

they're built—and in a world with magic, there's no need to worry about fuel."

"Who even *is* that?! Besides, this is a *fantasy* world! A world of *swords!* *Magic!* Why do you have to ruin my dreams like this?!"

"What are you saying? I've seen swords-and-magic fantasy worlds with cars and motorbikes in them before. And flying battleships, and blimps, and fighter jets. There are all sorts of fantasy worlds out there, you know? Heck, some of them even have robots."

"*Mmmgh...* I *guess*. But *this* world's still just barely developing! Do you really have to bring something so futuristic into it all of a sudden?!"

Zelos was absolutely cheating technology into existence here. But it wasn't as if he intended to sell what he was making, so it seemed like the world's medieval fantasy vibe would be safe for a while yet. If Zelos really wanted to, he'd even be able to make a tank—and he *did* like going overboard with recreating modern technology just for fun. But as long as he kept it within the realms of a hobby, it seemed unlikely to become much of a problem.

But to Iris, who was already feeling overwhelmed by reality, Zelos's actions felt like a disappointment. It wasn't like she had any right to criticize him; it was simply that he lived life at his own pace, and that he was bad at reading the room. But given her dreams of amazing adventures in a fantasy world, it left her a jumble of indescribable emotions.

"Anyway, what brings you here today?"

"Well, I'm kind of struggling to earn money right now, so I was thinking maybe I could get you to teach me alchemy... It kinda looks like you're in the middle of something, though."

"Actually, this is perfect. You see, I've just accepted a request to work as a guard, and I was thinking about asking you and the others to join me. The more people we have, the better."

"A guard job? Are you gonna be guarding the duke or something?"

"Hmm... Well, you're not far off. But *he's* not the one I'll be guarding. See, the thing is..."

And so, Zelos explained the details of the guard job to Iris. The one they would be guarding was the duke's first son, Zweit. They'd be guards at a combat training camp held by the Istol Academy of Magic, and protecting the target throughout the course of the event. The problem was, each mercenary would be assigned to guard a different student, making it hard to be sure that any given guard could be close to Zweit at all times.

That was why having more guards would be a positive. It would be critical to make sure that those involved could always stay in contact, and that they were ready to rush off to the site of an emergency at a moment's notice. Iris and her other party members would be there both to guard and to serve as Zelos's eyes, telling him immediately if they came under attack—and, if the situation called for it, doing their best to buy time.

Fortunately, Iris had a high-level Scouting skill. And *Zelos* was going to have a motorbike that would let him get to the site of an emergency in no time at all.

"I guess we don't really have any choice, Mister... Did you agree to this job *knowing* we were broke?"

"You're free to say no if you want. It *will* be a dangerous job, after all. I can't force you to do it, and if nothing else, I'll be able to take three very powerful birds along with me..."

"Three birds'... If you're going to have *those* things with you, will we even be needed?"

"I get what you're saying—after all their training lately, they're over Level 300 now, and they could evolve into cockatrices. They've got a high poison resistance too; in a sense, they're about the best guards you could ask for. The only thing is..."

"The only thing is *what*? Is there some kind of problem? And—wait, are you saying those chickens have gotten even stronger than last time?!"

"Well, with how much they seem to love fighting, I feel like they could get so absorbed in fighting other monsters that they forget they're there as guards. *That's* the problem. They really are warriors, through and through..."

"Yeah... I guess they *are* just birdbrains. Makes sense they'd forget stuff."

They weren't just some domestic chickens that'd forget everything within three steps, but they did have a tendency to get tunnel vision when they got heated. It'd be important to make up for that drawback—which was why Zelos was hoping to rely on Iris and her party. That was all it was. If they turned down the request, he really wouldn't be all that bothered; he'd just figured he might as well invite them, in case they could come.

“By the way, what happened to the other two? If you're struggling with money, I'm pretty confident Lena and Jeanne have to be broke too...”

“Jeanne's out helping Luceris. Lena's... I don't know what she's doing.”

“She's probably doing...something. Or someone. You know, I saw her coming out of an inn just the other day. Together with a bunch of teenage boys...”

“I guess she couldn't hold back her libido, huh... We're all broke, and she's out doing *that*...”

Unlike Jeanne, Lena seemed to have no inhibitions. You could say she was “faithful to her desires,” if you wanted to put it nicely.

The problem was, she was a bit of a degenerate. The sort to prefer her fruit on the unripe side. But that was tolerated in this world, to an extent; boys could marry from the age of fourteen, and girls from thirteen.

That meant that Iris was technically of marriageable age herself. But given she'd grown up with the common sense from her old life, she was against the idea. For the time being, at least, she was much more interested in going out and living her life as she wished. The future could come later.

But this world had a rather troublesome affliction relating to love. And it was one that, it seemed, couldn't be cured by any medicine. After all, it was something like a natural trait, lodged right at the very core of living beings in this world. Once it activated, not only would it quickly get out of control, but it could also potentially lead to your social death if things went badly.

“I've said it before, but I'll say it again—I'd recommend getting yourself a side job. This isn't a game. Reality's a harsh mistress, you know?”

“Yeah. I've learned that already... I know just having magic isn't enough to survive here.”

“Well, it’s a similar story for alchemy, but... Anyway, it’d probably be best if you were able to make some magic tools too. All you really need to be able to do is add support magic to a magic stone—and if you’re good at it, you should be able to make magic tools with some pretty good effects in no time at all.”

“It sounds like you can do all sorts of things. But why aren’t you using those abilities of yours to make money?”

“If I made things like that, I’d end up bringing some pretty crazy stuff into the world. Mostly explosives. And explosives. Oh, and explosives. Explosives are about the most effective things you can use, after all... And I’m good with them.”

“Do you make anything *except* explosives?”

The Black Destroyer had been going down the path of a terrorist.

Of course, he’d have no trouble at all making a plethora of simple magic tools filled with support magic. But considering the standards of the era, they’d end up being absurdly strong. It was a one-way trip to joining the ranks of the famous.

Besides, he just wasn’t interested in making support items. Sure, he was making some now, to deal with the specifics of the job he’d be taking, but he much preferred making *crazy* items. For example, something that’d grant you powerful defensive abilities, but also stick you with an annoying curse. Those sorts of pain-in-the-ass things were about all he usually made, apart from explosives.

Back when he’d been playing a character in a game, he’d been fond of saying, “Now, choose. I can grant you incredible power, with a terrible curse; or a paltry sum of power, with a trivial curse...”

It was a habit that had earned him names like the “Laughing Merchant” and the “Shady Merchant.”

Though when he’d taken on that persona, his identity had been hidden by a mysterious veil.

“Anyway, teach me some stuff that’s easy to make. I have some medicinal ingredients, but beyond that, I don’t know how you’re meant to actually mix

things together.”

“Sure, why not. Salves are pretty easy to make, at least, and if you mix in some powdered magic stone and add some mana to it, they get even more effective. You should be able to earn a decent amount if you sell them.”

“How much is ‘a decent amount’?”

“I don’t know the market prices. I’ve never actually had to buy potions, myself. Back in the game, I worked with my party members to make them together—if anything, *we* were the ones always selling out of stock, and at a high price, at that. Say, did you ever hear rumors about a Shady Merchant?”

“Yeah. That was *you*, Mister? I heard they were selling some pretty weird and crazy items...”

“Well... It was *us*, to be precise. Not just me. We all split the work between us to earn some money for the other things we did. Jeez, that takes me back...”

It was just another example of the Destroyers’ lack of common sense.

As Zelos and Iris continued to chat about all sorts of trivial things, the former taught the latter how to prepare medicinal ingredients.

Before long, Iris learned the Compounding crafter skill. And she was already a mage, so if she managed to raise her Compounding skill level enough, she’d eventually be able to branch out into transmutation too.

As Zelos taught her, he continued with his own crafting as well—and by the time Iris had properly learned how to create salves, he’d finished making his motorbike.

*

Around sunset, Zelos stored his newly built motorbike inside his inventory and headed out, feeling triumphant.

It wouldn’t be long before rumors started to spread of “a jet-black monster roaring down the highway insanely fast”—not that Zelos was aware in the slightest.

It shot right past the carriages of merchants traveling the highway, and even knights on their fastest steeds—leaving the knights convinced it was a monster

and driving them to set out in pursuit. But nobody could catch Zelos and his motorbike. You could hardly fault them either. The difference in horsepower was just too great.

Zelos had become a real “Highway Star.”

He’d only intended to give it a test-drive, but as you might expect, he got carried away before long. And so, a middle-aged man became one with the wind on the highway.

A jet-black whirlwind shot along the road—leaving behind the faint echoing laughter of a fool who seemed to be having the time of his life...

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

Carefree Life in
Another World

3
Story by
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Kotobuki




3
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Kotobuki



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





“I’m getting old, you see;
I’d really prefer it if
people didn’t surprise
me like that. What
happened to
respecting your elders?”

«
The
black-clad
mage

“That’s
rich,
coming
from a
monster
like you!”

The echoing sound of metal
against metal rang out as the two
men locked swords. It was the
classic image: two fighters



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The Diary of a Middle-Aged Sage's Carefree Life in Another World: Volume 3

by Kotobuki Yasukiyo

Translated by James McBride Edited by Lyn Hall

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