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

2
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Kotobuki







Those
are...
Those are
magic
formulas
carved
into them!

M-Master?
What are
these?

These
are some
magic
conduits I
made; you
can use
them in
place of a
staff.

When a mage granted a magic conduit
to their student, it signified that they
had recognized that student as a
full-fledged mage.

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Prologue: The Old Guy Feels Empathy

The Far-Flung Green Depths was a very difficult place for humans to survive in. But it was also a lush, verdant forest.

All sorts of monsters lived there, and defeating them could get you materials far better than what you could obtain in places inhabited by humans. Not to mention, the place was filled to the brim with clusters of ore, herbs, and more.

It was a place of two sides, then: a lawless danger zone where might made right, and a treasure trove that held all sorts of wonders.

It was also where Satoshi Osako, now known as Zelos Merlin, had been reincarnated due to some very careless behavior from the goddesses of this world. He'd managed to escape the place, eventually, and had ended up a private magic tutor for Celestina—the sole daughter of the Solistia ducal family—after just so happening to save her from bandits. Now, however, he was back in that very same terrible forest, having brought Celestina there to improve her skills as much as possible.

Together with Celestina's brother Zweit and a squad of knights, they'd ventured into the forest yesterday—and ended up running straight into a group of orcs, leading to the first battle of the trip. And just when they were done with that, the group had had an encounter with the “white terror,” a fearsome monster from which they'd only just managed to escape.

But Zelos, who had been dropped into this frightening forest on his very first day in this world, knew better than anybody else the terrors that lurked within. And so he could tell: they hadn't even seen the start of the trials that this place had to offer...

*

Morning broke on the group's second day in the Far-Flung Green Depths. Zelos emerged from his tent and bathed in the morning sun as it washed over the plains; it was a lovely way to start the day. He could smell the scent of

flowers wafting over from around the plains.

Before he'd come to this world, Zelos had lived the life of a farmer. He was used to waking up early. He also went to bed earlier than most people. But that was just proof of a healthy lifestyle.

The problem was, there was no field for him to cultivate here. It was all well and good that he'd woken up, but now he had absolutely nothing to do.

"Jeez, I'm bored... How should I pass the time? Should I have brought a book or something?"

For now, Zelos was just muttering to himself. He couldn't think of anything to do.

If he had been back on Earth, it would've been the perfect time to collect eggs from the chicken coop, then go out and mow the grass in the field. For breakfast, he would've just had the previous day's leftovers; then he would've watched some TV and gotten wrapped up in gaming in the afternoon. That was about how his average day had looked.

While he hadn't been working, he'd been getting rent payments from the house left by his parents, so money had been no issue; he'd been free to just laze around and do things at his own pace all day long. In a sense, you could say he'd been rather fortunate. But now, in *this* world, he was homeless and unemployed.

For the time being, he was getting by as a private tutor. But that was only a short-term job; a month from now, he'd be right back to unemployment.

Sure, if he went out and killed some monsters, he'd be able to sell their materials. But he didn't want to live such a bloody lifestyle if he could avoid it. He could also get some kind of job working for the state, but that was the *last* thing he wanted; he hoped to get back to living a free life.

Still, he was aware of how privileged he was to have that problem in the first place, especially given his considerable talents.

"I guess you can't always expect life to go how you want..."

Frankly, he didn't want to take on any kind of job that'd require him to be

responsible for things. Especially if those “things” were other people’s lives.

It had started out as a lovely morning, but the more Zelos thought about his future, the lower his spirits sank.

“*AHHH!* It’s here! It’s come to get us!”

“It’s the white terror! Th-The one that stripped our pants off!”

Two of the knights who’d been assigned to the final watch of the previous night were in hysterics.

“Calm down! We’re all here with you, okay?”

“You *liar!* You ran off without us yesterday! As fast as your legs would take you!” It seemed they’d sighted their sworn enemy, the crazy ape. The knights—the *male* knights, to be precise—had come to see the ape as terror personified.

Despite the monster being male, it had gone after the men yesterday without so much as sparing a glance for Celestina or the other women. Ultimately, it had managed to strip seven strong men of their pants—two of whom had even had their underwear taken off and their privates groped. That had given rise to a fear beyond words. A fear that only those who had experienced it could truly understand.

In a sense, they might’ve been better off fighting a dragon instead.

The crazy ape was nowhere near as *powerful* as a dragon, but it posed danger of a different kind. And it had left the knights with some major scars on their hearts...

“I can still hear the noise that thing made when it was leering at us!”

It seemed that these were the two knights who’d been stripped completely naked by the monster—and that the experience had been traumatic enough to leave them with auditory hallucinations. They’d felt a fear that only the men there could understand, and Zelos felt sympathy for them from the bottom of his heart.

If the men had been attractive enough, there might’ve been some women out there interested in watching that sort of scene play out...

Regardless, the heartfelt laments of the victims resounded in vain, carried

away by the morning winds across the plains.

“Huh? I’m crying for some reason...”

Zelos was in even lower spirits now, and for reasons completely separate from his earlier worries. He couldn’t stop the tears falling from his eyes.

What should have been a refreshing morning had been well and truly ruined.

Chapter 1: The Old Guy Takes the Lead

As you might expect from its name, the Far-Flung Green Depths was an enormous forest.

Despite covering more than half the continent, the forest was so dangerous that it remained largely unexplored. But even outside of the forest, the rest of the continent was home to countless monsters, with vast sections of land being untamed wilderness where the only rule was survival of the fittest. Consequently, only about a tenth of the continent was inhabitable by humans and other such peoples. And numerous countries were crammed together in that relatively small space.

In the aftermath of the Dark God War, the different countries had been united into a single major nation. That nation, however, had gone into decline before even a century had passed—bringing the continent right back to where it had been before, with various smaller countries vying for dominance. It all seemed like just another reminder of how difficult it could be to achieve true peace.

All the while, however, this vast forest had remained unchanged.

Monsters lived there in abundance, constantly fighting to eat or be eaten. It was a cruel, hellish environment—almost as if it had been made to keep out sapient life. About the only sapient beings who could live in such a harsh place were the elves.

The elves, for their part, rarely got involved with the humans, staunchly refusing to show themselves in front of anyone but specific individuals. And their reason for that could be traced back to the collapse of the major country that had formed after the Dark God War. At the time, the aim had been to build a nation where the different races could live in harmony—but ultimately, that dream had fallen apart within a mere century. As the years went on, racial discrimination had grown worse and worse, driving an intensifying ethnic conflict. Ultimately, the elves ran out of patience for the humans' foolishness

and decided to enter this harsh forest of their own volitions, to build a country for themselves—a country where they had since remained, isolating themselves away from the rest of the world. Their long life spans had caused them to look far into the future of their former nation, and they'd been driven to despair over what they'd seen coming.

By now, nobody knew exactly where to find the country of the elves. But many people—and many states—had tried their best to locate it themselves, eager to get their hands on the elves' knowledge of magic.

Elves were more adept at magic than humans. And as a result, unscrupulous higher-ups from various countries had a long history of plotting to force elves into servitude and incorporate them into their country's military machine. Frankly, then, it was only natural that the elves had run out of patience with having humans as their neighbors.

Any elves the humans *did* occasionally see tended to be the descendants of elves who had lived along the remote edges of countries bordering the Far-Flung Green Depths. By now, however, those elves had seen a remarkable decline in both their magical knowledge and magical abilities.

Perhaps it was because those elves had gotten used to their new environment, but they had come to think in a similar way to the humans despite their elven blood, and their living environments weren't all that different from those of the humans either.

Whatever the case, there were no elves in sight as the party set out for its second day of combat training. Zelos and the others were back to scouring the Far-Flung Green Depths for worthy foes to train up Celestina and her older brother Zweit.

However, the monsters that lived in these parts were stronger than those found in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. And the deeper into the forest you went, the more fearsome they became. Even the slightest slipup could cost you your life.

“Keep in mind: the mana density here gets thicker and thicker as you get deeper into the forest. It's not as bad here as it is farther in, but the monsters here are still going to be pretty strong, so watch out. Monsters born in a mana-

rich environment can be much stronger, after all.”

“The tree trunks here seem incredibly thick too, don’t they? I suppose the soil must have a lot of nutrients as well; I’ve heard that things grow very quickly here.”

“Not that I really *care* or anything, but...we’re not gonna run into *that* bastard here, right? This is pretty much the last sort of place I’d want to have to deal with him...”

The knights all nodded in agreement at Zweit’s words. But whatever creatures were around, they wouldn’t be good news. Not only were there plenty of known monsters with unusual habits, but there were also a lot of undiscovered monsters, with even more unpredictable behavior. Many had special abilities—evolved to help survive in the harsh environment—that could be very hard to deal with if you weren’t properly familiar with life in the wilderness.

Faced with the fear of monsters that could attack at any time, the party was more on edge than usual, and it was wearing them down in a major way, both physically and mentally. The main worry on their minds was still that white ape, though.

Suddenly, the party noticed something nearby.

But fortunately for them—or perhaps *unfortunately*—it was a different monster than the one they had been thinking about.

GROOOAAHR...

It had the body of a lion, a goat’s head protruding from its back, the tail of a scorpion, and the wings of a bat. A chimera. There was no real consistency between chimeras; while they were all the same species, there was a pretty wide variety. Some did look similar to each other, but others had completely different forms.

What was more, each one had its own special abilities. It made them difficult to fight—you wouldn’t stand a chance unless you were capable of constantly changing up your strategy to deal with whatever they threw at you. In short, they were *not* the kind of monster you wanted to encounter in a vast forest like this.

*

Chimera (Level 124)

HP: 2,846 / 2,846

MP: 3,527 / 3,527

*

“A chimera, huh? And it’s Level 124... Weaker than the last one I beat, then. *Damn*, the meat from that thing was tough...”

A chorus of shocked responses echoed throughout the forest. “Level 124?! You’ve got to be kidding! It’s impossible; there’s no way we can beat that! And are—are you saying you *ate* it? You *ate* a chimera?!”

The chimera’s level was about four times higher than the average level of the knights in the party. It far surpassed them in strength.

If it attacked the party, they’d die in an instant; that was how big the power gap was. Well, with one exception...

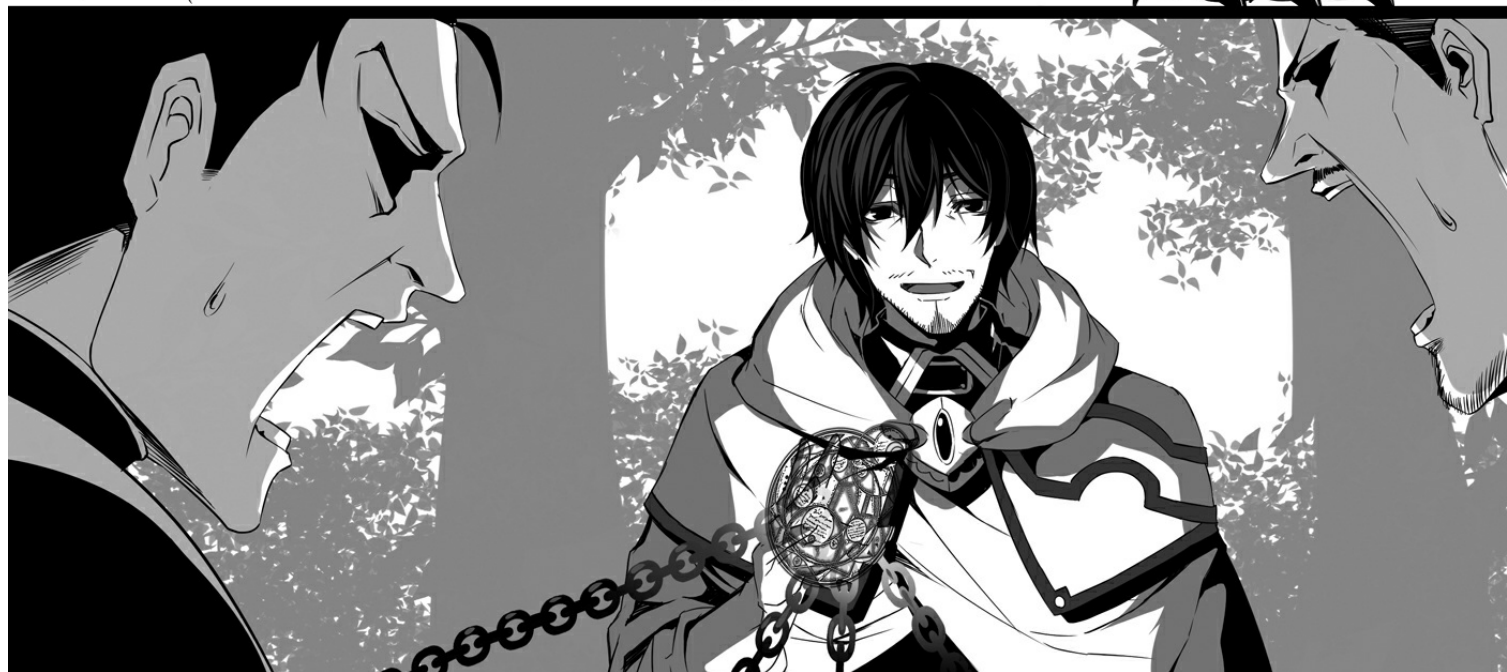
“Don’t worry. *Dark Chainbind*.”

Jet-black chains shot up from the shadows around the chimera and coiled around its body, locking down its movements in an instant.

The rest of the party was shocked. “What on earth are you doing?!”

“Uh... Defeating it? You can hurry up and attack now, you know. This spell drains the target’s mana, so the chimera’s going to be out of mana in no time. It’ll be a good opportunity for you!”

Zelos’s words were so ridiculous they sounded like a joke. But he was very much *not* joking.



“Are you *seriously* saying the damn thing’s not gonna attack us? It’s got two heads! And weren’t these things able to use magic?!”

“Well, they might attack you a *bit*, but my spell here has another effect: it lowers the target’s defense. Give it everything you’ve got and you should be able to beat it!”

Silence.

“Oh, I forgot to mention—this spell’s pretty powerful, but it doesn’t work for that long. So you should probably start attacking now if you don’t want it to break out and come for you, ’kay?”

“What the *hell* are you doing?!” Again, the whole party was dumbfounded.

At this point, however, they had no choice. Reluctantly, almost in tears, they drew their weapons and approached the chimera.

All they could feel was sheer life-threatening danger—and yet they had been left with no option but to go at it with their swords if they wanted to survive. Their will to live overpowering their fear, they swung at the chimera—knowing that it could break free and attack them at any moment—and gradually, bit by bit, wore its health down.

Given the state they were in, however, the group’s attacks lacked any sense of control or cohesion. It looked like they were simply flailing their swords about in a mad frenzy.

From an outsider’s perspective, it seemed almost like one-sided mob violence. But chimeras were spiteful by nature; if the group didn’t kill it here, it’d chase after them with a vengeance the second it was able. In the worst-case scenario, it could even chase them all the way back to the Magic Kingdom of Solistia.

Once, a noble had come into this forest, tried to defeat a chimera, and failed. And that same chimera had ultimately followed the noble back to their own territory and killed a considerable number of people.

If that happened again now—if this chimera *did* manage to make it into the Magic Kingdom of Solistia—there was only a small handful of mercenaries

who'd be capable of defeating it.

But one way or another, the group's frantic attacks finally brought the chimera's life to an end. All in all, it took approximately forty minutes—and perhaps because of that, the party, who had been swinging their swords the whole time, was mentally drained. While each individual's attacks had been weak, attacking as a group had allowed them to gradually build up damage on the chimera. Physically restrained and prevented from using its mana, the chimera had made for an easy target, and ultimately, they'd been able to defeat it without any real problem. Apart from, of course, the mental distress...

It wasn't just the knights: Celestina and Zweit were left pale from the experience as well. But you couldn't blame them—it was the first time they'd faced such a high-level monster. It was an enemy that, in normal circumstances, would've simply ended both of their lives in a flash.

Now that they were done, everyone was starting to look over their experience gains. “Ha ha ha... I'm Level 43 now. And I was only Level 24 just a moment ago...”

“Me too! Aha, aha ha ha... I dunno why, but I don't feel happy about it at all...”

“My body hurts. I wonder if it's a side effect of leveling up so quickly?”

“My skills have leveled up too! Aha ha ha...just how strong *was* that damn chimera?!”

“Whoa—I'm up to Level 62 now...!”

“And I'm...not far off Level 50!”

Still, not a single one of them was truly *excited* about their victory. There was no room for that in their minds; they were still practically paralyzed by their lingering terror of the chimera.

Zelos, who had merely sat back and watched the chimera's HP go down, had ended up calculating that each individual attack was only doing somewhere around 2 to 15 damage. It seemed like this particular chimera had specialized in defense, making it more durable than you'd usually expect of something its level.

While the effects of Zelos's Dark Chainbind spell had reduced the chimera's defense and taken its mana away, it seemed likely to him that the monster had had some sort of resistance skill, which had allowed it to resist the effects somewhat. What was more, it had apparently had a special ability that let it recover its HP—though that had been largely meaningless in the face of the mob violence it had been up against.

Though it was difficult to overcome Zelos's magic, it was by no means *impossible*. With the right special ability, it was entirely possible to resist his binding magic—though given that the monster had ultimately been defeated anyway, its resistance doing little more than prolonging its death, it was difficult to say whether the thing had been lucky or unlucky in that regard.

"Well, then, time to dismantle it. Can someone give me a hand?"

"Hang on just a second, you!" Another flurry of voices—angry ones this time, from the knights directed toward Zelos, who was about to start dismantling the body as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

They'd been forced to fight an enemy that they knew they'd usually have no chance against. And now that it was over, all that fear was changing into anger—anger that they now channeled squarely toward Zelos, the man who'd created the situation that forced them to fight in the first place.

"Why'd you have to make us fight against a monstrosity like that? What would you have done if we'd died?!"

"Were you trying to *kill* us?! Couldn't you have at least talked to us about it first?!"

"Oh? Did one of you die while I wasn't looking?"

"That's not the *point*! What I'm saying is, what if your binding magic had worn off before we'd beaten it?!"

"*Did* it, though?"

The knights paused for a moment. And then... "Wait a second." It looked like they were starting to realize something.

Zelos had told them earlier that the spell could wear off at any moment. In

reality, however, it had kept the chimera bound right up until its death—and only now were the knights starting to realize how strange that was.

“M-Mr. Zelos... Don’t tell me you *lied* to us? Surely not, right...?”

“Well... I mean, I do feel kind of bad about it. The truth is, though, you’re all too weak right now. If you come up against a strong enemy, all you can do is run away. And the thing is, that’s fine if you’re in a situation where you *can* run away—but if you’re not, then your only option is to fight. Which would absolutely be the death of you, as you are now. So I figured, well, I should probably help you level up to give you a better chance of survival.”

“Wh-Why did you have to do something like *that* to us, though...? If you’d just *told* us—even given us a basic idea—then...”

“I thought that if you got used to just relying on the strongest one in the group, you’d let your guards down, and end up not knowing what to do if you *actually* had to fight against a strong monster. It’s not like I’m always going to be with you—plus, if you don’t prepare yourself to go up against strong enemies, there’s no way you’ll be able to stay alive in this forest. The depths of this place are home to monsters far worse than chimeras, after all...”

Zelos was easily the strongest one in the group. For the knights, however, his presence was like a guarantee of safety. And if they came to rely on him too much, they could end up making the wrong decisions when eventually their lives really *were* at risk.

In other words, the sense of security from knowing someone strong was by their side could make them subconsciously assume they were safe—and make some kind of slipup. If he waited too long to teach them that lesson, it could be too late.

“Oh, so you were doing it to help train us...?”

“Your skills can be leveled up later, but for now, it’s important to get your own personal levels up as much as you can. You can’t let your guard down in this forest, after all—in more ways than one...”

“So you’re saying the security of having you around could actually make us weaker, Mr. Zelos? I suppose that does make sense...”

As they were now, the knights were nothing more than a hindrance to Zelos. The only solution to that was to make all of them stronger. It was also essential to train up their combat skills—which made it important for Zelos to simply restrain the monster and let the others be the ones to fight it.

Monsters in the Far-Flung Green Depths were of extremely high levels, and the area where the group was training now was nothing compared to the innermost depths of the forest. If the trainees were having difficulties *here*, they'd stand no chance farther in.

The orcs from the previous day had been fairly low level, which was fortunate. But in an environment like this, enemies above Level 100 could appear out of nowhere with ease. There was even a considerable chance of the group running into a monster of Level 500 or above.

If you looked at it from another angle, though, that meant it was incredibly easy for the party to level up by fighting those monsters—and so Zelos had reached the conclusion that, *Well, I'm already here to level up my two students, so what's the harm in training some more people while I'm at it? If things go well, they might end up able to beat the monsters from around this area themselves, one way or another.*

Essentially, it was like Zelos was saying, "I can't go as far as to personally look after every one of you. I can lend a hand to help you level up, but you'll need to be the ones to protect yourselves." However strong Zelos himself was, there was a high possibility that some situation—or even strategy—would see him separated from the knights. If they happened to run into some particularly fiendish monster during that time, and they were no stronger than they were now, they'd simply be annihilated, with no way to fight back.

For what it was worth, Zelos *was* trying to keep an eye out for their safety. But still, it was difficult to try and protect that many people at once.

As for how Aleph, the captain of the squad, was feeling about all this...

To think he'd come up with a plan like this for the sake of the knights... I already thought so when I first met him, but he really is something else! Sure, knights are all already elite, fit to protect the people, but this world has no end of strong enemies. And how can you call yourself a knight if you shy away from

every difficult fight? We have to be bold. Brave. Battles are always going to have opponents—and who's to say that those opponents will never be strong? Mr. Zelos's way of thinking makes sense, and I'm sure he's only being so harsh for our own good. So we should make the most of his kindness. And if the day comes when he needs our help, we'll have to be much stronger than we are now if we want to repay him for what he's done for us... In short, though Zelos didn't know it, his stock was going way up in the squad captain's mind.

The discipline inherent to the Order of Knights had made them all into straitlaced people, albeit muscleheads.

In other words, they were even more physically minded than Zelos had expected. However eloquent some of them might have seemed, the true nature of the Order of Knights was almost oppressively hot-blooded. That was part of the reason they got along badly with the more scientifically minded Order of Mages.

"All of you, listen up! We have absolutely been depending on Mr. Zelos. That was obvious even in yesterday's battle against the orcs, wasn't it? But are you really *okay* with that? We're *knights*! Protectors of the people! How are we to protect anyone if we cower in fear every time we see a powerful enemy? From here on out, we will follow Mr. Zelos's orders—and he'll make us stronger! We will become knights who can be a shield for the people in any emergency! Knights that everyone can be proud of!"

"Yeeeeaaaaaah!" A roar of approval came back from the knights.

They truly were a straightforward bunch. And now they, too, were on the path to becoming fearsome fighters under Zelos's tutelage.

From there, the search for monsters continued—and the group took the initiative in attacking any monsters they found. It was a nonstop massacre, bloodstains spattering on top of more bloodstains as the group fought to get stronger.

Two hours later...

"Shit! Watch out to your left! It's coming!"

"I won't be able to block it with my shield; I'll intercept it head-on! Someone

cover me!”

“I’ve got you. Here’s your cover: *Fireball!*”

“Lancers at the back—what are you doing? Hurry up!”

The group was now fighting against a group of green giants. Specifically, three giant trolls, a muscular type of monster with short legs that made for a noticeable contrast to their weirdly long arms.

The trolls’ wide, powerful swings felled trees around them as they fought. But the knights, who were smaller than the trolls, were better at maneuvering. Still, it was a dangerous fight. A single hit would be enough to kill one of the knights instantly.

Regardless, the knights were capitalizing on their advantage, putting up a brave fight in spite of their fear.

“Almost got one down! Knights, watch out—*Volcanic Blast!*”

Zweit’s attack spell caused flames to come bursting out of the ground, engulfing one of the trolls.

GROAAAAAAAAAH!

Charred alive, the troll let out a scream and fell to its knees. The knights who had been fighting against it directed their swords toward their next target. There were only two trolls left now, and their movements were slow—but still, their attacks were formidable.

In terms of sheer strength and endurance, trolls were on the stronger side of monsters.

“Trolls, huh...?” mused Zelos. “From memory, I think you can use their skins as crafting materials...”

“Right,” Aleph replied, then broke off to give orders. “Knights—don’t fight them head-on! Attack them from the side and the back!”

“Their skins should make for some excellent leather armor, but it *is* weak against fire magic, I guess.”

“That’s the drawback, yes. If not for that, then the Order of Knights would be

able to make good use of armor like that...”

“Is that really such a big problem? It shouldn’t matter that much if your armor’s weak against fire magic, as long as it’s good at protecting you from everything else, right?”

“The problem comes from the mages from noble families. They *love* their fire magic... Don’t get me wrong—there are some good ones out there—but they can’t go against what their factions want.”

Zelos wasn’t surprised to hear that there were some decent mages within the factions. But it sounded like the factions as a whole were akin to companies back on Earth that ignored the wishes of the common worker and just did whatever the company representatives wanted. The higher-ups, grasping for more and more power, spent all their time just “networking” without actually doing anything of use, leaving tasks like actual research to the lower-ranked mages and forgetting about it beyond that. Though of course, if those lower-ranked mages managed to create any useful spells, those same higher-ups would usually try to tout them as their own achievements to make themselves look better. From the perspective of the lower-ranked mages, then, the higher-ups were just a nuisance—but because the latter were largely nobles from prestigious mage families, those lower down the chain were unable to speak out against them, having to simply watch in frustration as the fruits of their research were stolen.

To make matters worse, it was those higher-up representatives who went on to become the most famous mages. It was a vexing problem for the knights, who were in charge of maintaining public order.

“Ah, so they’re using a lot of flashy, high-power fire magic, then? Oh—looks like the fight’s almost done. Shall we get going?”

“Yeah. And you know, despite the fact that they’re in the wrong, they just throw about their magic to threaten people... Anyway, there’s only one troll left; I’ll join in myself. Cover me, please.”

“It’s the upper ranks who are the problem, huh? I really don’t want to associate with any of them... Well, for now, have some strengthening magic. *Divine Giant’s Might!*”

“Thanks. And with that... Knights, don’t let it get away! I know you’re tired, but this is the time to show what you’re made of!”

Aleph, now strengthened by Zelos’s spell, drew his longsword and set off at a run toward the remaining troll.

Slipping past the troll’s flailing arm, he dodged its swinging club and closed in on the monster’s feet, his sword flashing in the light. He was aiming for the troll’s Achilles tendons. At this point, he and the rest of the knights looked almost like a horde of small carnivorous dinosaurs swarming a larger herbivorous dinosaur. It was as if they were physically incapable of giving up.

Aleph’s slash—powered up as it was by Divine Giant’s Might, Zelos’s body-strengthening spell—tore the tendons in the troll’s legs. And just like that, the giant, more than seven meters tall, collapsed to the ground. Celestina and Zweit took the opportunity to hit it with a focused barrage of magic attacks. Zweit used a spate of fire-based spells, while Celestina shot off powerful lightning magic.

The combination of fiery explosions and bursts of lightning left the troll at their mercy. It writhed in pain—though not for long, as Aleph put his whole body into cleaving through its neck with one last strike. The giant monster’s head fell to the ground, its body splattering blood all over the place.

“Yes! I leveled up again! Gotta say, though, *damn* my body hurts...”

“I’m the same. Master, I’ve reached Level 50 now!”

Celestina was in very high spirits. Zelos had promised her that if she reached Level 50 and got three of her skill levels up to Level 30, he’d teach her one of his original spells. And now that the time was finally coming close, she was jumping for joy.

Zweit, however, was a little suspicious of his sister’s happiness.

“Hey. Why are you so happy about reaching Level 50? If you really want to get stronger, you shouldn’t be so excited yet, right? Or...did you make some kind of promise with Teach or something?”

“*Gkh...* I-It’s nothing. I’m just happy about leveling up, that’s all. It’s true!”
Why does Brother have to have such good intuition...

“I don’t believe you. I’ve been leveling up as well, same as you, but I don’t know how you could feel like celebrating like that when we could be attacked by some other monster at any second. You’re hiding something, aren’t you? What is it? Tell me.”

“Really, it’s nothing! He definitely didn’t tell me that he’d teach me some special magic if I met some certain goals or anyth... Ah.”

“You really are terrible at lying, aren’t you? Any time you try to hide something, it shows up on your face right away, and your eyes start darting about. So? How about you tell me exactly what’s going on?”

“Argh... I’m so stupid! I suppose this is what happens when we’ve known each other for so long... I hate how honest I am!”

“C’mon, just spit it out! What are these ‘goals’ you’re talking about? And what kind of spell is he gonna teach you?”

Having been unable to inherit her family’s heirloom magic, Celestina longed to have a special spell that she could call her own. And in large part because of that, she’d been working earnestly to meet the conditions that Zelos had set for teaching her one of his original spells.

Now, however, her honest nature had gotten her into hot water—she’d let the cat out of the bag.

Now that he’d gotten the details out of her, Zweit was jealous, pouting tremendously.

“Why’s it only you? That’s not fair! I want one of Teach’s original spells too!”

“Gahhh... I was so close! I just needed to get my skill levels up now! And at the rate I’m going, I was about to get there soon...”

“One last thing. You still haven’t told me—what kind of spell is he gonna teach you? Spit it out.”

“I... I don’t know. He said he was going to make it a surprise...”

The siblings’ relationship had rapidly improved since they’d started taking Zelos’s lessons together.

It was as if the years of bad blood between them had all been a lie. Tracing it

back to its roots, though, it had largely come down to the attitudes of the two duchesses. What was more, now that Zweit had learned the truth—that Celestina’s inability to use magic had been through no fault of her own, and had come from a problem with the magic formulas—he was embarrassed by how he’d seen her in the past, and he’d resolved to fix his attitude toward her. That was all it was.

Similarly, the times he had bullied her in their younger years had been his way of one-sidedly taking out the anger he’d built up toward her on account of his mother’s influence and Celestina’s supposed lack of talent. And now that he was aware it had all been a misunderstanding, he was trying to mend things as quickly as he could; he had an honest side to him. While it wasn’t as if that alone would be enough to close the gap between them, their joint combat training against the golems had done a lot to repair their relationship in a short time. It was hard to tell whether he’d actually apologized or not, but regardless, it was clear at a glance that his attitude toward her had softened.

Rather than the number of words between them, it came down to the number of hours they were spending together. Well, things weren’t quite that simple for Zweit’s relationship with Luceris...but that was another matter. For now, Zweit’s mind was on his magic—and he came up to Zelos, getting right up in his face.

“Why only Celestina?! It’s not fair! I refuse to accept it! Teach me some kind of special magic too!”

“You can use the magic passed down through your family, can’t you? Celestina doesn’t have anything like that.”

Zweit was silent for a moment. “Fine. I’ll teach her our family’s heirloom magic, then—so can you teach me some of *your* magic?”

“Well, if you’re fine with the same spell I’m going to be teaching her, then I guess I don’t mind. But not until she’s finished reaching the goals I told her to meet, okay?”

“Yesssss! I’m getting pumped now! All right, then, let’s prioritize leveling up Celestina’s skills...”

“Come on, don’t just forget about your own training like that. Or have you

forgotten what you're even here for in the first place?"

Celestina, meanwhile, was glaring over at Zweit, her cheeks now puffed out in a pout of her own.

While the three of them were doing all that, the knights were busy dismantling the trolls' bodies. Between the size of the things and the fact that there were three of them, it was posing quite the challenge for the knights, as you might expect. For starters, they were knights, not mercenaries; their dismantling abilities were a little lackluster. And while going about it as a group made things quick, it was hard to say whether the materials they were recovering were all that usable.

Either way, though, the materials would at least be enough to bring in some income on the side, so the knights were going about the task with glee.

Seeing as this guard mission was meant as practice for them as well, it had been decided that a portion of the materials from any monsters they defeated in the forest would go toward lining their pockets a little for their efforts. The Order of Knights would be responsible for liquidating the rest.

Apart from that side income, the materials would be used to raise operating funds for the Order of Knights, which would then go toward the cost of things like maintaining the knights' weapons and armor.

As the knights worked frantically on dismantling, Zelos was muttering to himself. "Man, I wanna drink some beer. And if I had some chicken wings to go with it, everything'd be perfect..." Wine was common in this world, but what he really longed for was a nice cold can of beer.

But the day wore on—and ultimately, by the time the camp came back into sight, the sun had already set.

The group had beaten orcs, goblins, and even a type of giant snake known as the "paralysis snake." They were all exhausted; they'd used up the last crumbs of their stamina to fight that final troll. There was also a sense of tiredness that came from such rapid leveling. And on top of it all were hunger and mental fatigue. With the combination of all that, their footsteps were heavy as they trudged along.

Still, one way or another, they'd made it back to their camp. But when they got close enough for a better look, they were all lost for words.

The tents that they were meant to sleep in had been destroyed, and it seemed like something had gotten into the bulk of their luggage and strewn it haphazardly around the place. Clearly, the place had been attacked while they were gone. The biggest hit was to their food: most of what they'd brought had been either picked through and eaten or taken by whatever had attacked the camp when it had left.

"Wh-What even happened here...?"

"Did a monster attack or something? The whole place should've been completely warded by Mr. Zelos's magic, though..."

"Right. What exactly managed to get in here...?"

The encampment was surrounded by rock walls that had been formed with magic; when the group had gone into the forest, Zelos had opened up a hole to let them through, then sealed it back up again once everyone was out. The carriages they'd used to get to the forest had been left at a nearby village and were long gone, with the exception of one they'd kept at the camp to store their luggage.

There were still four days left until the end of their training, and their plan had been to make do until then with the food and other provisions they'd brought with them. But now, whatever had gotten into the camp had laid waste to that food. What was more, countless monster corpses were strewn about the place, as if some sort of battle had occurred.

"Did something really get in here? But...*how*? Don't tell me it was that crazy ape?!"

"Don't even joke about it. More importantly, what are all these bodies littered around the place... Wolves, huh?"

"Forest wolves, and some hunter wolves as well... What *happened* here?"

"If these monsters really *did* attack, then where'd they even get in from?"

"Hey, there's— Over there! There's... There's something there!"

All at once, the knights turned their gazes in the same direction. There, under the covered wagon they'd been using to store their luggage, they could see some kind of shadow wriggling about, slipping in and out of view.

A hush fell over the group. And as they listened, they could faintly hear a chewing sound, as if whatever was in there was eating something.

Crack.

Suddenly, another noise—quiet, but noticeable amid the silence. It seemed like someone had stepped on a dead twig.

Of course, whatever was behind the mountain of barrels in the wagon was able to hear it too...

It raised its head and turned, slowly, to face the group. Fortunately, it wasn't what the knights had thought it might be—but nonetheless, they were faced with a terrible sight, and it left them pale. It was a long, soft creature with no legs or arms—a worm.

As they took a closer look, they realized: it had been eating the other monsters.

"D-Don't tell me... Did that worm really eat that many other...?"

"Come on, surely not. There must've been other monsters that attacked as well..."

Lying among the scattered remains of the food the group had brought were the corpses of wild wolves and forest wolves. There were even a few crazy ape corpses among them.

"This is bad. We're all completely exhausted right now. And if there's one worm here, there could be others hiding underground, just waiting to ambush us."

A careful observation of what was going on led Aleph to realize they were at a disadvantage. Facing the party was a giant worm, over two meters in length. It wasn't fit for eating, and you couldn't get many good materials from it; fighting it would just tire you out with no real reward. About all you could use from it were the many fangs from its mouth and its blood. It wasn't clear how many

other worms were around, but one thing was clear: if a battle erupted, the knights wouldn't have the strength to put up a good fight.

A cold sweat started to trickle down the knights' faces.

Chapter 2: The Old Guy Zones Out from Reality

The huge worm was poking its head out of the ground of the campsite, devouring the body of a forest wolf with gusto. Sprawled nearby were the corpses of the crazy apes—by the looks of it, they'd been mauled to death by the wolves.

Most likely, the worm had sensed slight vibrations coming from the ground here, and had followed them to their source in search of prey. The vibrations wouldn't be strong enough for it to detect unless there were a *lot* of monsters all in one area—so from the fact that it *had* been able to detect them, the worm must have known that there was something worth emerging for.

The answer was starting to reveal itself now. It seemed like the crazy apes had started the raid on the base; while they were inside, they'd been set upon by the wolves; and then the worms had appeared to prey on the wolves. It was an impressive food chain. But however the situation had come about, the knights weren't in any state to fight right now.

"Guess I've got no choice," Zelos said. "I'll deal with it myself. Only thing is, I don't know how many more of these things could be lurking about. So please stay where you are, okay? These things identify their prey by sound."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Zelos. We just don't have the strength to help you fight at the moment..."

"A hero... He's a hero!"

"Oh god..."

"Come on, men—get in there and fight! Or are you just going to sit in your little safe spot and quake in your boots?"

"And you call yourself men? What a bunch of losers!"

The female knights were shooting their male colleagues cold looks. But the men weren't heroic enough to do what the women expected of them. If their foes had been mere bandits, then perhaps they would've exhibited the pride of

knights. But as things were...it just wasn't going to happen.

At this point, the fatigue from leveling up had made it so that simply moving was a monumental struggle for the knights. Even Aleph, the squad captain, couldn't hide the tremble in his legs.

"You're expecting us to fight just because we're men? That's discrimination! What happened to equality, huh? Don't just bring out the gender roles in times like this!"

"Yeah! Even us guys would fight now if we could get our bodies to move! Must be nice being women—being able to push things like this onto us! We're men? So what! That doesn't mean *anything*!"

"If you women can still fight, then *you* go fight it! Go ahead! But we can't right now!"

"Y-You pieces of..." The women were getting fed up with the men's attitude.

It was clear that none of the knights would be useful here. The never-ending chain of battles had used up just about all their mana, leaving them in low spirits. By the looks of it, the lack of mana was messing with their heads.

And at this point, their minds were all on a downward spiral.

*

Country Worm (Level 204)

HP: 1,023 / 1,023

MP: 311 / 311

*

Zelos appraised the monster. Its name made it almost sound pretty tasty, he thought.

"A worm, huh? I've heard they can do some real damage to livestock. Anyway, its level's not too far off from the chimera's, so why has it got so much less health and mana?"

“Maybe because this one hasn’t evolved yet? It’s probably able to differentiate into a few different types of monster.”

In other words, if a monster evolved into a higher form, it would go back to Level 1. But in exchange, it would become far stronger. Seeing as the chimera had been stronger than this high-level worm, the chimera had probably evolved at least once. It had, after all, managed to stay alive for an impressively long time, considering the number of people that had been attacking it.

So they can evolve, eh? I thought this world was meant to work like a game, but it seems nature works a bit more like how it did back on Earth. Still, I’m sure there are a lot of things that are the complete opposite of what I’d expect...

Until now, Zelos hadn’t entirely believed everything that had been written in the message he’d received from the goddess.

It made sense, though; creatures had to meet certain requirements in order to evolve. A world in which something could evolve right away just by hitting the right level didn’t really work, given the laws of nature. It would be an absurd way for a real ecosystem to function.

In most game worlds, evolving just required you to have enough experience points, and if you did, you could turn into some sort of higher form. But in *this* world, as Zelos was starting to piece together, evolution was more like a phenomenon that was likely to occur if the right environmental conditions were met.

If levels *were* the only requirement, he figured, there’d be no end of evolved monsters around these parts. After all, the Far-Flung Green Depths had an endless menagerie of powerful monsters, all engaged in a fierce struggle for survival. Weaklings had no chance of surviving here.

“So that probably means most of the monsters around here are Level 200 to 300, huh...?”

If that were the case, he’d have to train his students and the knights up to about that level range if they were to have a chance of surviving on their own. But they only had four days left—nowhere near enough time to get those sorts of results.

Not to mention, that wasn't the only problem. The party was already feeling an extreme sense of fatigue from all the levels they'd gained so far. It was the drawback of leveling so rapidly, and it was caused by the body being unable to change quickly enough to keep up with the power its owner had attained.

The point was, they were all so fatigued right now that they'd struggle even to defend themselves; Zelos was the only one who was still able to fight.

He let out a sigh. "Well, let's get this over and done with. I want to have plenty of time for a good rest..."

He wasted no time, drawing one of the swords at his waist even as he spoke.

"Sound Bomb."

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The Sound Bomb spell worked by causing an incredibly loud sonic explosion.

While it didn't have any effect *except* for that sound, it was perfect for luring out any creatures hiding underground.

The sound turned into vibrations that went through the ground, enticing out the worms that had remained in hiding. There had been five of them underground, apparently—and now, out they came.

"Thunder Bullet."

A ball of lightning appeared at the point of Zelos's sword. And as he held out the sword and swung it in the direction of the worms, the lightning shot out and surged toward them as if it had a will of its own. The monsters were struck by the lightning and temporarily paralyzed.

"Force Enchant."

Zelos followed up his attack spell with Force Enchant, a buff that could be cast on weapons or armor to make them stronger or sharper for a short while. The worms—unable to escape back underground due to paralysis—were now nothing but targets to be eviscerated. A single slash was all Zelos needed to send their heads flying, causing green fluids to spurt out of their grotesque forms as they died.

The knights simply stood and watched, dumbfounded by the spectacle of

Zelos's attacks. It looked like he was flowing perfectly from one attack to the next without even the slightest gap.

“Well, that’s that. Shall we get skinning? We’ve got the other monsters’ bodies to deal with as well, so we’d better get going pronto with the dismantling. It’d be nice if we could at least get *something* that’ll sell for a decent price...”

A cheer erupted from the knights. “Whooooaaa!”

“All hail our hero!!!”

Zelos's impressively clean fight left him bathed in applause from the knights.

The knights were so fatigued—and so addled by their lack of mana—that it seemed as though they’d started to see Zelos as a true hero. But Zelos was unfazed; he merely got to work on skinning the bodies.

Given all of the bodies strewn around the campsite—not just the worms, but a plethora of other monsters as well—the dismantling took a bit of time. But eventually, it was done.

Now it was time to examine the spoils of war. The meat from the worms was simply incinerated, as it couldn’t be eaten. The most interesting find came not from the worm, but from one of the other monsters that had been caught up in the bloodbath:

*

White Ape Pelt

Pelt from a crazy ape. A material of the utmost quality, it can be sold for a hefty price. Mainly used to make coats for nobles, this pelt is particularly popular among noblewomen.

The beautiful sheen of the fur and its pure white color make the pelt a clear standout in the market, contributing to its popularity. But merchants find it difficult to get supply of the pelt, so there’s never enough to go around,

and it's always expensive.

Also infamous because of the many hunters who seek out the pelts in an effort to get rich quick, only to never return from their hunt...

*

"'Pure white,' huh?" Zelos couldn't help but retort. "Pretty funny, given how the damn thing itself is anything *but* pure..."

"I never would've thought the famous white ape pelt came from *that* bastard..."

"You know, somebody from the academy was boasting about wearing a coat made from a white ape pelt...but somehow, I can't bring myself to envy them now. I'm curious, though—why did these apes die here? I wonder if they were just too slow to run away."

"No wonder any mercenaries who go hunting for the pelts don't come back. They must've all been, uh, *devoured* by those things. And I'm not talking about being literally eaten."

"Jeez, that's terrifying. I'm so glad I became a knight instead..."

"You can say that again. If nothing else, we get a steady wage, so we don't have to worry about money like mercenaries do."

The knights breathed a collective sigh of relief at the fact that they'd ended up in their current jobs.

White ape pelts were bought at high prices by merchants, spurring mercenaries and hunters into a frenzy to find them.

But for whatever reason, many of the mercenaries who accepted those requests went missing, never to return. And now, the party here had figured out why.

Some of the knights here had started out as mercenaries, and they'd climbed their way up through the ranks to become knights through merit. It was an elite occupation, open only to those who could make it through the tough

examinations and rigorous academic assessments. If any of those knights had accepted one of those requests back when they were mercenaries, they could easily have ended up in hell.

They were realizing that now—and from the bottom of their hearts, they felt incredibly fortunate to have made it through the strict selection process for the Order of Knights.

Knights were, after all, something like civil servants. They earned a steady wage, so they didn't need to go out on dangerous quests to secure an income for themselves like mercenaries did. But the knights here were forgetting something: right now, they were in a demonic forest ruled by survival of the fittest. A forest where so many *other* savage monsters lurked as well. It was too soon to say they'd escaped a terrible fate.

"This is a bit of a pickle, though. We've got next to no food left now..."

"Not only the apes, but the wolves as well... Just how many monsters got in here? And how'd they even get inside in the first place, I wonder?" Zelos was trying to think things through.

Trying to ignore the rumbling in his stomach, he took a look around the perimeter of the camp, searching for clues.

After investigating for a while, he figured out that something had dug a hole from outside of the wall, creating a tunnel to the inside.

The other monsters had probably then found that hole, made their way in, and started fighting over the food—giving rise to an epic battle, where it was eat or be eaten. By the looks of it, a number of crazy apes had just grabbed some food and run, while the wolves had been set upon by the worms, eventually leading to the death of the entire pack.

"It's hard to imagine a monster making a hole like that. It must've been something surprisingly intelligent..."

"S-So wait, this place was attacked by a pack of wolves *and* a pack of apes? I don't want to think about what would've happened if we'd run into them ourselves..."

"More importantly, what're we gonna do about food now?!"

“Good point—we’ve still got four more days out here. It’ll be a while until our ride comes back to pick us up...”

“So what? We just can’t eat or drink until then? You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Hey, don’t get angry at *me*!”

It was only their second day here, and the knights were already starving. And upon seeing them in that miserable state, Zelos...felt his mouth twisting into a grin. A grin of true joy, from the bottom of his heart...

“M-Master? Why do you look so happy about this?”

“O-Oh? Is that really how I look?”

“Don’t tell me you’re actually *enjoying* this, Teach...”

“Uh... No! No, not at all! I’m *definitely* not happy to finally have others in the same boat as me...”

Zelos’s mind was going back to the situation he’d been in about a month ago. Back when he’d been wandering around this vast forest alone.

He’d had access to water, but nothing to eat except for meat; it had taken all he had to just survive, and he would’ve starved if he hadn’t been constantly hunting. He was fortunate to have *eventually* stumbled out onto a road—but if he’d made even the slightest mistake, he would’ve still been lost in the forest alone, struggling to survive, up until this very day.

That week had put such pressure on Zelos’s psyche that he’d ended up just one step away from reverting to some sort of primal state.

This time, though, he wasn’t alone—there were others here too, companions facing the same trials he was. The thought of it filled him with a genuine sense of happiness.

And yes: both the knights and his two students would now have to live on nothing but meat for at least the next four days. There was no other way about it.

“You’re rotten, man...”

“Master, you’re horrible...”

Zelos could feel the cold gazes of his students piercing his body. But still, he couldn't wipe the smile off his face.

"Come on, everyone! Let's all share the misery between us, eh?"

A chorus of angry voices came back at him. "You've *got* to be kidding us! *Please* say you aren't serious!"

"I want to see you all suffer the way I did!"

"Crap. Look at his eyes! He's serious!"

Zelos's week of surviving in the wilderness had made him prone to these bouts of emotional instability. Seeing him go into that crazed state sent shivers down the spines of everyone else there, his two disciples included.

Unfortunately, it was already decided: everyone here was about to head down the same path as the middle-aged Sage before them. It was time for a fun, exciting camping trip in the forest of despair.

Zelos's grin on that day was bigger than any he'd ever worn before.

It was a dazzling, radiant smile...

*

For the next two days, the knights and the students experienced hell.

They'd head into the forest in search of prey, defeat whatever they found, take apart its body, cook it, and eat it. It was a primitive, savage life, with no time to rest. In this forest, you'd die if you slipped up—and just four days here had been enough to awaken their wild instincts.

They killed wild wolves who tried to steal their prey, slaughtered goblins who went after the female knights for their bodies, and turned the tables on orcs who tried to hunt the group as prey of their own. By this point, their eyes had become those of madmen.

A dangerous light flickered within their pupils as they fought, and fought, and *fought* for the simple purpose of securing food.

They let out fierce war cries upon killing their enemies; they shared what little food they had with their comrades; and they crowded around the fire at night,

dancing in ecstasy over their successful hunts. Their primitive instincts had awoken.

Any monsters who attacked their camp were dispatched without a shred of mercy, the group hacking into them with brute force. They fought purely on instinct. That just went to show how dangerous the Far-Flung Green Depths was—if they didn't go that far, they wouldn't be able to survive.

They came to learn that getting off as lightly as they had in their first two days here had been sheer luck. And now, they were being made to feel—in pure excruciating detail—how cruel nature could be. They had no room to falter.

They didn't even have the leisure to celebrate for a moment when their levels went up.

THWOOSH!

An arrow pierced through the head of a slash rabbit.

The rabbit spasmed and then, with no strength left, drew its final breath.

One of the female knights let out a scary-sounding laugh. “Yes... *Yes!* I've got some meat!”

“*Tch!* You beat me to it. So? What's next?”

“There's a meat orc over here!”

“Right! Let's go fuck it up!”

They were at the edges of the Far-Flung Green Depths—the relatively safe part of the forest—and yet even here, they were like this. The group was starting to get a good picture of just how harsh an environment Zelos, who'd been far deeper into the forest, and alone to boot, had had to endure.

After all, even here, they were being attacked about once an hour by starving monsters looking for their next meal. Most of the monsters that attacked them couldn't even be eaten, so they were just wasting the group's energy—causing their anger to build and build. They weren't getting even a moment to rest before the next pack of monsters came and attacked.

It was just a constant cycle, with zero breathing room between each fight. The situation had driven the party to realize that they wouldn't survive without

going back to their primal instincts.

And now, all the stress and anger they'd been building up was exploding out. They had turned into full-on berserkers.

"Th-This is getting kind of scary, Master. What's *happened* to everyone?"

"They've adapted to this huge forest. Realized that if they want to survive here, they've got to leave behind their naivete and close off their hearts. Heh heh heh..."

"Teach... Don't tell me you're becoming the same as..."

Zelos let out a disturbing laugh. "At the end of the day, kids, this world's eat or be eaten. There's no way humans raised in civilization—*stained* by it—are going to survive for long out here in cruel Mother Nature. You guys'd do well to let your primal instincts take over like the knights over there have, mmkay?"

"No! There's *clearly* something wrong with them! However you look at them, their minds are just, like...*broken* or something!"

"They're just doing what you call 'search and destroy.' Essentially, it's kill or be killed out here..." Another creepy laugh.

Despite the situation, Zelos was smiling. He was feeling joy from the bottom of his heart—and a sense of nostalgia.

Day after day, he was reminded of how he used to be, being made to realize just how weak and frail his life in modern society had made him. That is, until his little survival experience, starting right on the first day of his reincarnation, had reshaped his mind into that of a savage beast.

A beast that was now reawakening after a month of slumber.

"Captain! Over here! I found some scraps of the jerky that got stolen from our camp!"

"What?! Whatever stole it must be up ahead, then... All right! We're going to track them! The moment we find them, kill them all! Don't let a single one get out alive! We're going to get revenge for the food they stole!"

Aleph, too, had reverted to a primal attitude. Once a courteous knight, he was now just a ball of crude instinct.

Elsewhere in the party, there were no traces of the terrified men who had just days ago been cowering in fear of the ape. Those same men were now demons in human form, their minds filled with nothing but the thought of killing their enemies.

Their bloodlust on full display, the knights began following the trail to find their sworn enemies—the crazy apes.

“All righty, then—let’s get going. It’s time for some revenge!”

Celestina was distraught. “Are... Are humans really all just animals once they take off the mask?”

Zweit was too: “This is wrong! Something’s just...incredibly *wrong* here!”

But their words didn’t reach the knights. The only way of getting through to people in this place was violence, nothing more and nothing less.

The Far-Flung Green Depths wasn’t so forgiving that you could get by with just wisdom and bravery. The whole place was crawling with fiendish monsters—and at the end of the day, the victor was decided by sheer instinct and strength. Naivete would only get you killed here.

*

Crazy apes tended to live in rocky areas. They were, after all, apes.

The party was hiding in the shadows among the trees—and from what they could see, there were twenty-three apes in the pack.

Each pack had a hierarchy with a leader at the top, and only the higher-ranking apes were allowed to reproduce. The problem was...

“Hmm? Aren’t there too many females here?”

“Yeah—and now that I take a look, doesn’t it seem like there are some weird-looking ones in there...?”

“Yeah... It’s hard to tell whether they’re male or female, huh?”

There were some odd-looking individuals in the pack of white-haired apes. The main way to tell the sex of a crazy ape was to look at its breasts; the second-best way was to see whether it had some slight yellow highlights in the

hair on its head.

The males were smaller and slimmer than the females. The females, meanwhile, were awfully muscular and large-framed.

Here, however, there were some unidentified individuals, with builds somewhere in between the two. They had breasts, but their genitals, while present, were somewhere between male and female. Yet the most unusual thing of all was their leader.

Zelos's Appraisal skill kicked into action automatically, showing the leader's status in his mind.

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Queen Alienekonga (Level 15)

HP: 3,167 / 3,167

MP: 742 / 742

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It was a gorilla. And as you'd expect from the "queen" part of her name, she was female.

She had glossy green fur, and came in at five meters tall—bigger than the crazy apes.

Presumably it was an evolved form of some sort...but even then, her massive size seemed far beyond what you'd expect of a primate.

As the party watched, she used brute force to push down the male crazy apes and mate with them.

"Wait—can that thing seriously crossbreed with the apes?!"

"So it works the same as goblins and orcs, does it? That's disgusting..."

"Uh...is it just me, or are those humans over there too? They just look like some old bandit guys, but still..."

The party responded in unison: "I don't want to look!"

Certainly, upon closer inspection, there were a handful of bandit-looking men among the apes. But absolutely *nobody* wanted to acknowledge that.

“You know, I’m not sure, but...maybe the crazy apes don’t actually have any normal males.”

“What do you mean, Teach?”

“I’m thinking that maybe they all start out as females, and then some of them transform into males under certain conditions. It’s just a guess, though.”

“What?!”

If crazy apes *were* all born as females, then it’d start to explain the behavior that Zelos had seen from them so far. As primates, they had a hierarchy; only the higher-ranking ones in that hierarchy were allowed to freely reproduce, and the weaker ones transformed into males. This sort of phenomenon—where some kind of stress factor could alter an animal’s genes and change its sex—was occasionally seen among certain fish. But the odd thing here was that it was happening among *mammals*, and primates specifically.

In the case of crazy apes, that stress came from the leaders of the packs.

For the relatively weaker apes, the leader’s orders were absolute. And with no chance of winning in a battle of strength, they wound up being used as mere tools for reproduction. Individuals who built up a lot of stress from that ended up stuck as males—and so they tried to assault human males to relieve that stress and turn back into females.

At the same time, if they could prove that they were stronger than other males, they would be able to move up in the pack’s hierarchy. And based on that, Zelos reasoned that the apes who appeared halfway between male and female were either males in the process of turning back into females, or females partway through the process of turning into males.

In a nutshell, while all of the crazy apes were born female, many ended up essentially being forcibly transformed into gay males due to biological circumstances.

From a human’s perspective, it was a scary thought.

“So, Mr. Zelos, what you’re saying is that...they’ve been attacking us in order to turn back into females?”

“I...think that’s the case, yes. Hierarchy is important for pack animals, especially when it comes to food.”

Apes had a hierarchy that determined how much food each individual could eat and when they could eat it. The leader had first pickings, and the other apes weren’t able to lay hands on the food until she was done eating. When the leader was done, the other high-ranking apes were able to eat—and sometimes, the lower-ranking ones would end up left with no food at all, causing them to starve.

In the harsh environment that was the Far-Flung Green Depths, every little bit of extra food could make a huge difference for weaker monsters. And as a result, they were relentless in targeting males from different packs, or different species altogether, in an attempt to display their own strength. If they won, they’d abduct the male they’d targeted—and, by going up the ranks, gain the right to reproduce. The bandits, meanwhile, had lost—they were at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

“So are you saying that...they see us as being essentially the same as them?”

“Yeah, do they think we’re the same species as them or something? Not that I want to believe it...”

Zelos responded with an oddly lilting tone to his voice. “Ah, you might be right... And if we lose, I think we’ll be ending up like *them*, my dears.” He pointed toward the tragic figures of the bandits.

“Master, why don’t these apes attack women? If they think we’re another pack, then wouldn’t they see the women in that pack as dangerous enemies? Enemies they should defeat right away?”

“I don’t think they want to take the risk! Because of how their own packs work, when they see a few women in a big group of men, they assume those women are some real girlbosses! So they try and have some fun with the boys instead, to feel good about how *big* and *strong* they are...”

That demonstration was a problem for the humans—but in nature, the simple

power dynamic between strong and weak was everything.

Mother Nature would sometimes bestow unusual traits upon creatures. Traits that went far outside of human expectations.

“So it’s not like they’re actually *trying* to be perverts, huh? Also, I guess it doesn’t really matter, but...aren’t you talking kind of weird, Teach?”

“Oh, but they *are* still perverts! Ahh, such naughty boys...”

Zelos’s eyes were glazed over. If he hadn’t essentially had cheat mode turned on when he’d reincarnated into this world, he would’ve probably ended up in the same position as the poor bandits here. And now, as he had that realization, Zelos’s mind was trying to reject reality itself. What sliver of common sense he had about him had led him to a realization that he found incredibly hard to swallow.

“So they see men as being the weaker targets, then? By the way—where’s the food they stole from us? Do you know where it might be?”

“Probably inside that leader’s belly by now... Oh, what a lovely meal it must have been... ♪!”

“Hey, Teach... Are you *actually* going insane or something?”

“Yes... Isn’t Master going to be in danger if we leave him like this?”

But it was time for the assault. A roar came from the knights: “All right, you filthy apes, you’re *dead!*”

The knights had built up some real resentment over the stolen food. Even on the battlefield, food was essential; the Order of Knights made sure to cook and hand out the appropriate amount of food to everyone, so keeping a proper stock of food was of utmost importance. It was something that had been drilled into the knights as a top priority over the course of their harsh training.

One knight overindulging themselves could make the rest of the squad go hungry, so rations were always tightly managed whenever the knights went out on a campaign or an exercise. Here, though, those precious rations had been stolen, devoured, and scattered about—by a pack of apes, to boot. The knights would *not* be forgiving them.

Especially since the stolen food had been bought with the taxpayers' hard-earned money.

The knights were so angry that they were going into a meltdown.

"Surround the perimeter! All knights, prepare your projectiles and throw them toward those bastards on the signal!"

"Yes, sir!"

With well-coordinated movements, knights split off from the squad, forming smaller parties of a few people each. Taking care to stay downwind, they wrapped around to surround the rocky area from all sides and waited for orders not far from the pack. It all took only an instant.

Having become stronger by leaps and bounds over their days in the forest, the knights prepared to use their newfound strength and their newly acquired combat skills to mow down their sworn enemies.

"Miss Celestina—the signal!"

"R-Right! *Flash!*"

Celestina's magic erupted right in the middle of the pack of crazy apes, blinding them without warning. It was also the signal for the knights to begin throwing something, all at once. As the projectiles landed, yellow and purple smoke engulfed the area.

The crazy apes' bodies became paralyzed, and they were afflicted by poison to boot. It was a hunting technique that the knights had picked up over the past two days in the forest. A reliable old trick for taking down prey—but hardly how knights would usually fight.

"*Zephyr!*"

With an air spell, Zweit spread the paralyzing and poisonous mists throughout the entire pack of apes. And once it was clear that the mists had taken effect, the knights drew their swords and rushed in.

"*Die, you scum!*" The knights roared.

Paralyzed as they were, the crazy apes were slaughtered by the knights, unable to even fight back. In a group battle like this, robbing your enemy of

their ability to fight was Combat 101—and that was true even if your enemy was a pack of monsters.

However, you could never know what sort of power a monster could be hiding. Which was why the knights were using this method, as cowardly as it might have seemed. This was a hunt—and in the Far-Flung Green Depths, hesitating to use every trick in your arsenal could get you killed.

“Flame Arrow!”

“Lightning Bullet!”

In order to make *extra* sure they were finishing off the apes, the group was trying to rack up extra damage on them by having Zweit and Celestina use attack spells. The fire spread across the bodies of the crazy apes, prompting them to stop fighting and try and put it out. Meanwhile, they were struck by lightning, which only left them all the more paralyzed.

This was a battle against monsters, not other humans—and so the party was happy to make use of every means at their disposal, no matter how cowardly.

“Make sure you finish it off! This one’s a higher level!”

“Third one’s dead!”

“On to the fourth, then!”

While their levels had gone up, the knights still weren’t physically all that strong. But through tools and tactics, they were managing to reliably land some decent hits.

The Far-Flung Green Depths was a dangerous place, one where you were always walking a fine line between life and death. The knights’ minds were all too full of the will to survive to be thinking about their knightly honor. Out here in nature’s war for survival, there was no such thing as cowardice.

The crazy apes continued to fall with ease. But the big one—the one that’d be real trouble—was still somewhere in the mist: Queen Alienekonga. And upon seeing the damage to her pack, she came to the fore herself, beating her chest to intimidate her foes.

“Hey—I don’t think the poison’s working on her!”

“Shit! Don’t tell me she’s resistant to it!”

Alienekonga jumped into the air and landed with an impact that set the ground rumbling. She swung her impressively long arms about, side to side.

“Gwaaaaakh!”

One of the knights, who managed to barely block with their shield in time, was knocked a full few meters back from the impact.

But the giant gorilla wasn’t done. She raised her arms, and brought them slamming straight down toward a knight standing nearby.

“Whoa!”

He managed to dodge by a hair’s breadth, but the shock wave the slam created sent him—and the ground around him—flying back through the air.

“Waaaaaaagh!”

“Damn, she’s strong! So this is what the leader of the pack can do...”

In the queen’s frenzy, however, she wasn’t thinking straight. With each attack, she was sending the crazy apes from her own pack flying as well.

Weakened as they were, the apes, unable to defend themselves, died on the spot. It looked like Alienekonga was the kind of boss you wouldn’t want to have. She was strong, but she wasn’t *smart*. And seeing the bodies of her fallen comrades only sent her into a bigger rage.

“Focus on dodging her attacks! Take one hit and you’re dead!”

The gorilla continued to flail her arms with abandon, mowing down the crazy apes. She was slaughtering her own pack faster than the knights could. This went beyond just stupid; she was apparently a complete idiot.

“She might be a moron, but we still can’t handle her!”

The knights were trying to launch counterattacks, but the queen’s tough hide prevented their swords from even getting through. And she was taking advantage of that opportunity to send her fists slamming down toward them when they approached. One of the knights’ shields had gone flying into the air.

Alienekonga leaped once more into the air, showing a speed you’d never

expect from her size. And she landed with a boom, her stubby feet coming right down onto one of the bandit men. Blood exploded out of his body; he was dead in an instant.

“Shit, I don’t wanna die like that...”

“What a tragic way to go...”

Violated by crazy apes, and trampled to death by their leader. It really did seem like a horrible way to die.

The rest of the victims—the bandits—had already lost their minds and were just wandering aimlessly around the place, getting in the way.

But not for long. Queen Alienekonga’s fist came slamming down onto a group of the bandits, turning them into nothing but horrific slabs of meat.

Death was perhaps salvation for the men, who had long lost their minds.

“Light Chainbind!”

Shining chains appeared from the air to ensnare the giant gorilla, rendering her unable to move. It looked almost like she’d been crucified by them.

“Mr. Zelos!”

“Get some attacks in while you can, please. She might have some sort of special attack of her own, though, so be careful!”

“Understood! Those of you with medium-range attacks, give it all you’ve got! We’re going to pulverize this damned gorilla!”

“Light magic: God’s Blessing.”

God’s Blessing was a spell that strengthened a group of allies in an area. In this world, it was considered to be holy magic—more specifically, a spell that legend said could only be used by high priests. It provided a significant boost to the attack, defense, evasion, magic attack, and magic defense of the targets. The targets’ HP and MP would automatically regenerate for a while as well, helping to keep the caster’s allies alive. And it also worked as an incredibly powerful attack against any undead creatures—though of course, there were some exceptions.

All at once, the knights fixed their prey with predatory glares, their faces splitting into savage, brutal grins.

“All *right*! It’s killing time!”

The knights let out a decidedly unknightly shout as they went in for the kill.

Chapter 3: The Old Guy's Trauma Shows Up in a Dream

With Queen Alienekonga chained up, the party prioritized finishing off the rest of the small fry around the area.

They were a pain, swarming around as they were—and moreover, they were the offenders that had stolen the party's food. The knights laid into them with fierce, hate-filled strikes. But then there was a bit of a problem: some crazy apes that had been away returned to the pack, and decided to intervene in the battle. Just when the party had managed to get the upper hand, things went right back to an even playing field.

There were also the figures of the remaining bandits that had fallen prey to the apes...but mentally, they were already dead. There was no saving them at this point.

"Finish them off, quick! We've still got the big one to get back to!"

"We'll be finished with them soon, Captain! Shouldn't we try and damage her a bit before then?"

"You might be right... Miss Celestina? Mr. Zweit? Can I ask you two to handle Alienekonga?"

"Leave it to me! *Flame Javelin!*"

"I'll do what I can! *Lightning Lance!*"

The party got to cleaning up the rest of the crazy apes and attacking Alienekonga at the same time.

Perhaps because of how tough her hide was, Zweit's and Celestina's attack spells didn't do all that much, even though they'd been buffed by Zelos's own magic. At best, maybe the lightning-based attacks were having a bit of an effect. Of course, the spells had their paralysis side effect, but their impact was debatable apart from that. Meanwhile, Alienekonga—her comrades defeated,

and her frustration building over the foes swarming around her—seemed to be chewing something. And all of a sudden, she spat it out.

It just looked like phlegm. But as it made contact with rocks, it gave off a sizzling red heat, and melted them into lava.

“Y-You’ve got to be kidding... I do *not* wanna die to an attack like that!”

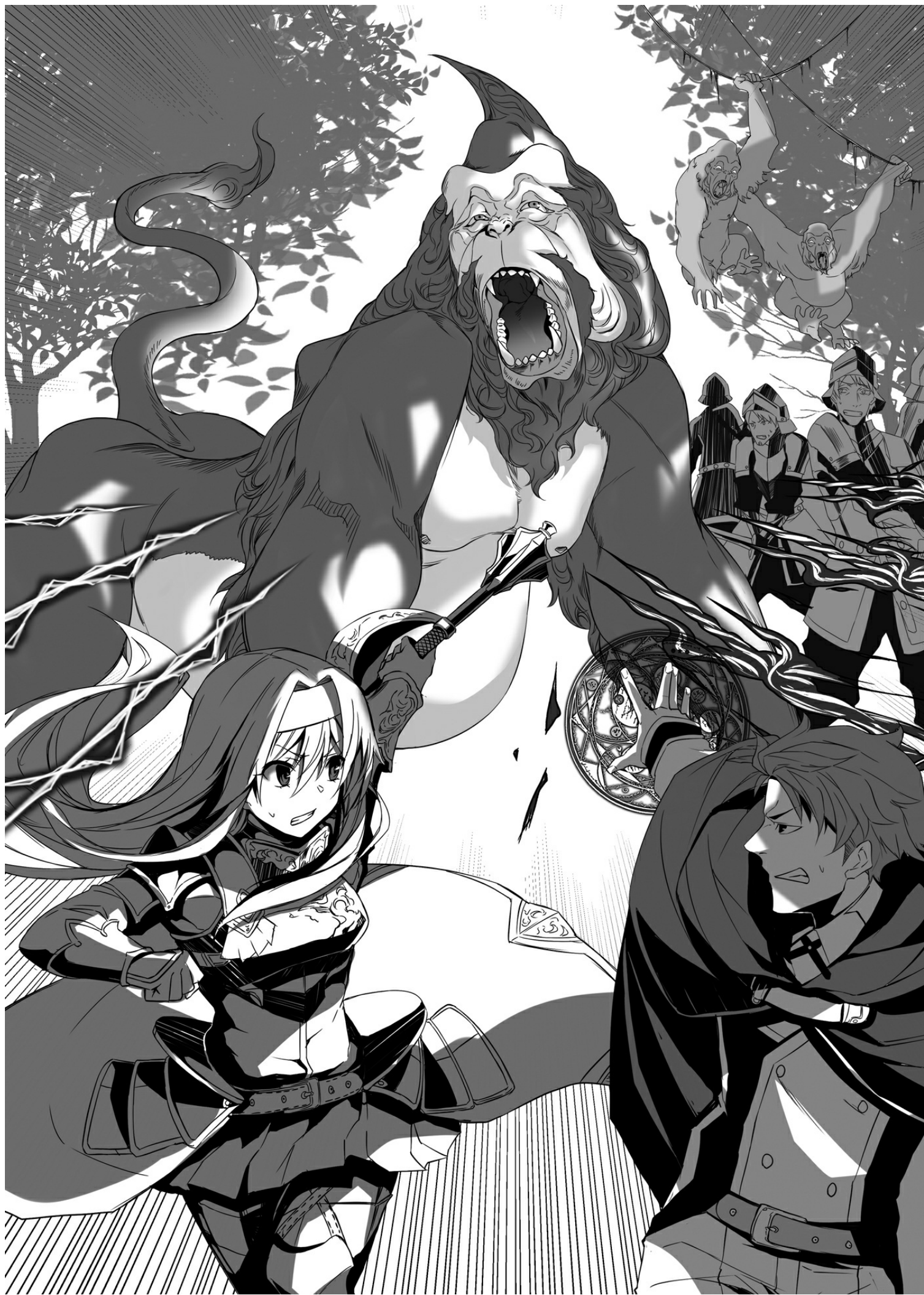
“What a...dirty attack. I’d be so embarrassed if something like that killed me...”

Alienekonga had used mana to convert her bodily fluid into a powerful acid. It was an amazing attack, both in its force and in how gross it was.

“Guess we’ve got to attack from behind. Don’t fight her head-on! *Sonic Blade!*”

“And now... *Mighty Judgment!*”

Aleph went in with a sword technique, and Zweit followed up from behind with a newly learned one of his own. Both were powerful slashes, and they landed cleanly on Aliekekonga—but even then, they only managed to pierce a single layer of skin.



That was just how tough the gorilla's hide was. Unable to land a decisive hit, the pair was simply using up their mana.

If Zelos attacked, it would all be over in a flash. But for now, at least, his top priority was to get the group's levels up. So he was specifically holding off on attacking, and he was trying to not intervene unless he absolutely had to at the last second.

"I guess I'll have to go with a big one... *Thunderstrike Flash!*"

Thunderstrike Flash was a sword skill. It covered the user in lightning and gave a temporary boost to their physical abilities, providing a sudden burst of destructive power for a mighty slash. It was the biggest trump card up Aleph's sleeve.

The attack tore through Alienekonga's tough skin, causing blood to spurt out through the air.

But even that wasn't enough to deal a fatal blow. In fact...

CRACK!

A high-pitched metallic sound rang out. The chains of light that had been binding Alienekonga had broken into pieces.

"What? She can use Bind Breaker?!"

Bind Breaker was a combat skill capable of negating capture and binding magic.

Even if Zelos held back with his magic, a regular monster would have no chance of fighting against it. But Alienekonga had managed to break out.

"About the only things I can think of that'd let her do that are Second Wind or Berserk... I wonder which one she's got?"

"Is this *really* the time for a casual chat, Teach?! That thing's bad news!"

Queen Alienekonga's fur was standing on end—and turning red.

Her body was growing larger as well; her muscles were swelling to a bizarre extent, and her veins were popping out and pulsing ferociously.

"Ah—so it is Berserk. That one can be a bit of a pain sometimes."

The rest of the party was dumbfounded: “How are you so calm about this?!”

There was no stopping Alienekonga now that she’d gone berserk.

Relying solely on brute force, she pulled a big tree right out of the ground, and started swinging it at Zelos and the others.

“The thing’s going even crazier now!”

“I can’t handle it! Someone, please, do something!”

Alienekonga was going on a rampage—and what crazy apes were still alive were getting caught up in it.

She was mowing down trees, crushing rocks into dust...and continuing to fight. Berserk was a dangerous skill—it activated when the user was at the peak of rage, providing them with terrifying power, but it also used up their life with abandon.

Consumed by her fury, Alienekonga became unable to see her surroundings, and was ready to throw even her own life away. All she wanted was to pulverize her enemies, and the effects of the skill wouldn’t go away until every last enemy before her was dead.

“This thing sure is being a nuisance, huh? I guess I should take it down quickly... *Thunder-God’s Lightning Orb!*”

Judging that it would be dangerous to have the knights keep fighting against the monster any longer, Zelos summoned a palm-sized ball of lightning without delay, dived at Alienekonga’s chest, and blasted her with the spell at point-blank range. At least, it *looked* like just a ball of lightning...but the amount of mana and force it contained was off the charts. Upon its release, the ball unleashed that power and force, burning Alienekonga to a crisp. The remaining electricity then surged out around the area, destroying trees and rocks alike.

Finally, burned to death from the inside out, Alienekonga collapsed. A gust of wind blew, almost as if to signal the end of the fight.

Zelos took out a cigarette from a pouch at his waist, put it in his mouth, used the Torch spell to light it, and let out a quiet puff of white smoke, his face devoid of emotion.

He sighed. "It all seems so pointless. I feel so empty right now..."

As he smoked, the knights and his students shot cold gazes in his direction.

It seemed like they wanted to gripe, "If you could've beaten it that easily, why'd you wait so long?!"

The cigarette smoke floated slowly away on the breeze, like smoke from an incense stick left to mourn the fallen giant.

But the Far-Flung Green Depths wasn't a kind enough place that it would let the party get off with just that.

Suddenly they heard the sound of something running through the undergrowth.

"What was that?!"

"Wait... That's..."

Appearing before the party was a massive red wolf. It seemed like they were out of the frying pan and into the fire.

And it wasn't just that; accompanying the massive wolf was a pack of smaller wolf monsters. They began eating the flesh of the crazy apes the party had defeated. Even in this vast forest, the food chain was an unchanging reality; if the wolves picked up the scent of blood on the wind, they'd come to steal the prey from whatever had killed it. And of course, the monsters that Zelos and the others had defeated were no exception.

In this harsh world, where staying alive was all that mattered, it wasn't uncommon for battles to erupt over prey killed by a third party. Every creature fought to stay alive and pass on its genes.

"Hmmm...a red greed battlewolf, huh? Well, it's a bit of a pain, but let's beat that and the rest of the wolves while we're at it, I guess. Fortunately, the God's Blessing I cast on all of you earlier should still be active."

"You're kidding! This thing's an A-rank monster, you know?!" The rest of the party was shocked.

Zelos shrugged. "I mean, if we try to run, they'll just pick us off. Animals like this have a habit of chasing after fleeing prey, so as long as we're in this forest,

it's not like we'll be able to run away from them."

The party was lost for words. Powerful monsters wouldn't let prey escape; unless you defeated your enemy, you'd end up dying to them. That was the harsh reality of this world. And it was especially true in this accursed forest, where monsters appeared one after another without end. The party never had a choice in the matter to begin with. Hands shaking, the knights grasped the hilts of their swords, and resolved to fight again.

"N-Now that it's come to this...I guess we've just got to kill until there's nothing left!"

Half out of sheer desperation, the knights dived right back into another battle with their lives on the line.

The red greed battlewolf specialized in fighting. It had high mobility, but most notable of all was the deadly venom it could secrete from its fangs. Just a single bite and you'd be in for a bad time.

They also had a habit of forming packs with other wolf monsters and hunting together.

"Let's start off by clearing out the weak ones. *Piercing Arrow of Lightning!*"

The spell Zelos fired off was a modified version of the default Lightning Arrow spell, and he'd cast it without an incantation. Countless bolts of lightning shot out, leaving the weaker wolves with nowhere to go.

"Zweit, Celestina... I know you're tired, but could you finish cleaning up the weaklings for me?"

"Teach... Don't tell me you're gonna fight that big one?!"

"Don't be reckless, Master!"

"It'd be a bad matchup for the knights—so I've gotta be the one to go. Anyway, I'll be relying on you two to deal with any wolves that try to get in my way, okay?"

Leaving those words behind, Zelos headed off in a run toward the red greed battlewolf.

He drew his swords, pushed his physical abilities to the max, and began the

hunt.

“Mr. Zelos is going to deal with the big one. Knights, keep the other wolves’ attention and make sure they don’t get in his way!”

“Leave the defense to me! I’ll take care of any that slip through!”

“I’m not gonna die in a place like this! I *will* make it back, mark my words!”

The rest of the party was left to deal with the other wolves. Most notable were the hunter wolves—a higher form of the regular wild wolves. Of course, the pack included regular forest wolves and wild wolves as well.

A knight wouldn’t have any problem dealing with just one of them. The problem, however, was that the wolves worked as a pack, making them much harder to fight. Their basic tactic was to have the weaker wolves surround the target with sheer numbers, then have their leader—the red greed battlewolf—charge in and wreak havoc. That would make the prey fall into a panic, creating an opportunity for the wolf pack to attack them in earnest. And this time, as usual, they were going for that strategy, with Zelos as their target.

What was more, the wolves knew when to retreat. So if you managed to thin their numbers a bit, they were intelligent enough to pull back.

Precisely because they were weaker monsters, they had to be strategic to survive in the harsh world of nature through their cunning. That was what made them so difficult to deal with.

If it had just been the wolves, then the knights alone would have been enough to deal with them. But when you added the red greed battlewolf into the mix, the encounter became far more threatening, and you wouldn’t even stand a chance unless you had an S-rank adventurer with you.

Which made it inevitable that Zelos would have to take on the biggest wolf alone.

“Okay, then... I’d *really* like to have a rest, so let’s get this wrapped up nice and quickly.”

Zelos closed the gap with Shukuchi, a hand-to-hand combat skill that let the user cross large distances with incredible speed. Once he was in range, he

swung the swords he held in each arm, aiming straight for the wolf's rear legs.

Real life wasn't like a game, after all—it was always wise to start by shutting down your opponent's movements.

Zelos gathered mana into both of his swords to make them even sharper, then sent them slicing through the beast's thick flesh as if it was butter. And just like that, he had severed the red greed battlewolf's tendons.

GROOOHHH!

The giant wolf howled. Knowing that it wouldn't be able to move freely with the tendons in its rear legs severed, the beast started concentrating mana inside its mouth, intending to eliminate the threat that stood in front of it. It was the giant monster's trump card: Flame Breath.

Since the attack used an immense amount of mana, it was a special move; the beast would only be able to use it once. About the only things that could fire it off repeatedly would be monsters of an impressively high level or dragons.

"I've fought you guys a bunch of times before, you know? That won't work on me. *Divine Silver Barricade*."

At the same moment the breath attack fired, Zelos's magic activated.

An invisible barrier deployed in the shape of a cone deflected the incoming breath—and then, by stretching out that barrier like a lance, Zelos was able to use it for a counterattack. The lance tore its way through the breath ability and pierced the body of the red greed battlewolf.

That was how you used Divine Silver Barricade—a spell that let you form barriers of any shape you desired.

"Decapitate."

The Decapitate sword skill was effective against enemies that had already been weakened somewhat, allowing you to cut their heads cleanly off in a single strike. The problem was that that effect didn't work unless you had already weakened them first; if you didn't, you'd just be wasting your mana. It was a difficult spell to use, in other words, especially since the way to use it differed depending on the size and species of your opponent.

Here, however, it had worked—and the red greed battlewolf was left without a head. Blood spurted out everywhere as the creature died.

Hmm... Just like I thought. It's weaker than the ones that live deeper in. Well, not like that's a problem, since we can eat it anyway... Damn, I feel like eating some ginger pork all of a sudden.

This huge wolf had some tasty meat. It was enough of a luxury ingredient that selling it could get you a hefty sum of money.

Zelos got straight to work on dismantling the monster's body—in spite of the battle unfolding behind him, where the rest of the party was still putting their lives on the line against the remaining wolves. But Zelos just considered this to be another part of their training. He didn't intend to interfere.

With the leader defeated, the pack would now be led by the next-strongest monster within—a hunter wolf. But there were multiple hunter wolves, each forming their own packs, and some of them were quickly sensing the crisis they were in and starting to run away.

The wild wolves and forest wolves, which were the most numerous among them, ended up splitting themselves between the new packs. That alone was a blessing.

The party didn't need to bother with the fleeing wolves. They'd be fine as long as they directed their attacks toward the wolves still coming at them and dealt with those.

"Roar, great thunder! Pass your judgment of lightning upon the fools grouped before me! Lightning Rain!"

"Come, raging whirlwind, and cut down all who stand in my way! Air Stream!"

Zweit and Celestina activated their spells at the same time—spells that synergized with each other, tearing apart any wolves that were still attacking. Any able to escape the carnage were dealt with by the knights.

"Aaaaargh! I refuse to die here!"

"I haven't gotten married yet! I won't let these things kill me off so easily!"

"I haven't even been able to get a girlfriend...like hell I'll die alone out here!"

Eat shit, you furry assholes!”

“I’m waiting for my kid to be born! There’s no way I’m gonna die in a place like this!”

At least one of the knights’ laments actually sounded respectable. But the knights were unified in putting their lives on the line against the attacking wolves. The same thing was true for all of them: if they didn’t make it through this, they wouldn’t see tomorrow.

“Celestina, let’s save our mana! I’m gonna fight ’em up close. Handle the forest wolves for me!”

“Right! Now’s our chance—let’s defeat them all at once!”

Weapons in hand, the siblings moved in to join the knights in close-quarter combat. Zweit kept the wolves in check with his longsword, while Celestina took down the irritating forest wolves with swings of her mace. Their training against the golems was paying off. Harsh noises and yelps echoed through the forest.

The smarter of the remaining hunter wolves, realizing they were at a disadvantage, started to pull back, each with several followers in tow—though it would’ve been better for everyone involved if they’d just done that earlier. Looking back at the very first hunter wolf that had fled, Zelos had a bit of an introspective moment: *That one’s got a long life ahead of it, I bet...*

Ultimately, the party had won, and they’d managed to further increase their levels. Though by the time they all got back to their camp, they were once again taken by a horrible fatigue even worse than their physically bruised and battered bodies.

None of the knights were even able to keep watch for the night. And so Zelos, unable to turn a blind eye to the situation, waited until all of them had gone to sleep, cast recovery magic to heal them, and silently volunteered to keep watch himself—just for this one night. He was used to this lifestyle, after all.

Still, he couldn’t do anything about their breakfast for the next morning: more meat. Their only saving grace would be the fact that they had some seasonings.

That night, Zelos had a dream.

He dreamed of the third night he'd spent in this world, back when he first arrived in the forest.

That day, he'd been attacked by group after group of monsters. Even after he'd managed to kill himself some prey, flying monsters had swooped in from the sky to steal it from him; and when he'd killed some more, he'd encountered a group of carnivorous monsters that had been drawn in by the scent of blood.

In that vicious cycle, he had grown exhausted in both body and mind. Before he knew it, the forest had become shrouded in darkness, and he realized he hadn't had anything to eat or drink since morning; he was terribly hungry. His *second* prey had been stolen from him while he was fighting, and by that point, he was just *done* with the whole day. And as his bad luck would have it, the seasonings in his inventory were past their use-by date—so even if he managed to get his hands on some meat, he'd be forced to eat it without any flavor. He didn't even have any salt left.

Since he hadn't joined any raids in a while, he hadn't bothered to keep a proper supply of food. But he was regretting it now.

When he'd slept by a river the previous night, he'd been set upon by a group of spear-wielding lizardmen—so this time, he decided to spend the night in the shadows of a rocky area. At least it wasn't winter.

At this point, he didn't even have the energy left to speak. Whether it was simply because of his exhaustion, or whether his body was trying to distract itself from his hunger, he went straight to sleep. And that was when *it* appeared. Zelos awakened to the feeling of some sort of presence jostling his body about from side to side.

Blinking his sleepy eyes, he tried to get a better grip of the situation—and it wasn't long before, half asleep though he was, he started to get an idea of what was happening. His pants had been pulled slightly down, and he could see his naked rear. The top half of his butt was exposed.

What was more, whatever had awoken him was trying to pull his pants further down. It was some sort of apelike creature with white hair, long arms, and a lecherous expression on its red face. That was how Zelos and the crazy

ape first met.

They locked eyes for a moment, silent.

And that was when Zelos realized the truth. The terrible, terrible truth.

Before his eyes was a fierce, mighty rod, pointing toward the sky. A veritable Tokyo Skytree between the monster's legs, grotesque and splendid enough that you'd need to censor it if this were back in Japan.

The beast gave him a questioning grunt, its voice as lecherous as its face.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Zelos's shriek that night echoed throughout the Far-Flung Green Depths. He'd just been so exhausted that he was unable to even speak, yet now he was letting out a truly impressive scream, echoing out to the horizon.

It was at this time he remembered two things: that there were some truly horrible monsters out there, and that he was a modern Japanese man with the willpower to say *no*. What began, then, was a game of tag—dangerous in more ways than one.

On that day, Zelos sold his soul to the devil. From that point on, he vowed, he would turn the tables on every last monster that came after him, and he *would* kill them. Not only that, he would stay vigilant, search actively for enemies, and indiscriminately slaughter any that were lurking nearby. He would even be more than happy to chase and exterminate any who tried to run away.

In order to live—and in order to protect his privates—Zelos became a demon.

At the end of the day, this place was ruled by survival of the fittest; the defeated had no right to complain. Nor, of course, any right to their chastity...

*

Zelos opened his eyes to a nice, calm morn—

SCHWING! CLANG! CLANG!

"Shit! How'd they manage to get in?!"

"Doesn't matter—just keep cutting their heads off! There's no end to the damn things!"

“Noooooooooo!”

“Th-They’ve caught Ness! Captain?!”

“Ngh... Mr. Zweit! Miss Celestina! Some backup, please!”

Both siblings let loose the same spell: “*Fireball!*”

FWOOOMP!

Okay, so maybe it *wasn’t* a nice, calm morning. The campsite was in an uproar. Wherever you turned, there was just more shouting and gore.

“Guess I was just having a nightmare, huh? A real nasty one, though. Wonder if it’s because we ran into that whole pack of apes yesterday? Anyway, it sure is noisy out there. Not that that’s anything new around these parts...”

Despite the fierce battle unfolding outside the tent, Zelos was taking it easy.

Letting out a yawn, he picked up the swords he’d left lying nearby and exited the tent. Just as he stepped out, however, one of the knights went flying past, right in front of his eyes.

“Whoa. *That* was close.”

If he’d been just a step farther ahead, the two would’ve collided. It really *had* been a close call. A cold sweat started to form on his brow.

It was the final morning of the party’s combat training in the Far-Flung Green Depths—and as Zelos took a closer look at what was going on, he saw that the knights were under attack by some kind of huge plant monsters.

One of the plants had grabbed onto a female knight. And while several of the other knights were trying to save her, it wasn’t going well for them—they’d gotten surrounded by other monsters at some point, though the knights couldn’t quite tell where they’d come from. Just yesterday, they’d made it through an arduous string of battles with Queen Alienekonga, a red greed battlewolf, and more...but at the heart of it, it didn’t look like anything had changed.

They were still up against monster after monster, and eating nothing but meat. It might’ve been their final day here, but the forest wasn’t ready to let up on them just yet.

“Where did these things even come from...?”

The campsite that was serving as the party’s base in the Far-Flung Green Depths was surrounded by magically created walls, with no obvious way for monsters to get through. By process of elimination, they must have come from underground. And that seemed entirely possible—in fact, other monsters had already done the same thing on just the party’s second day here, digging a tunnel to let themselves in. Other monsters had ended up flooding in through the hole that day, enticed by the opportunity, and had begun stealing and eating just about all of the party’s food.

Human ideas of common sense didn’t apply in this forest. It was a harsh environment, where each monster had unique abilities that they used to try and win out in the never-ending battle for survival. A place where even the tiniest careless slip could get you killed.

Figuring that these monsters might have some nasty abilities of their own, Zelos used his Appraisal skill to get a better idea of what they were up against.

*

Man-Eater Beastblossom (x6) (Level 126-176)

HP: 248-303 / 248-303

MP: 615-1,045 / 615-1,045

*

The skill returned a rather messy result, bundling the plant monsters together into a single readout.

“Beastblossoms,” huh? Are they just called that because they’re kind of beast-like plants? Or...does it mean they’re able to spawn other monsters to fight for them, perhaps?

On a closer look, green ivy was growing out of the plant monsters’ bodies. And since it looked like that ivy was connected to the man-eaters attacking the knights, Zelos determined it was probably the latter option.

If my memory's right, I think these things can drop one of the catalysts you need for creating homunculi...

Zelos was analyzing the monster with a calm eye, wondering how closely it lined up with what he knew from his time playing *Swords & Sorceries*.

Despite being plants, man-eater beastblossoms were resistant to fire and weak against ice magic. They could reproduce monsters that had fallen prey to them in the past and use those monsters as an army for their future hunts. The monsters they created had the same weakness as the beastblossoms themselves, so they were relatively straightforward to defeat. But they could still be a pain to deal with if they came at you as a group.

There were six of them here—and indeed, it looked like they were causing some trouble for the knights and Zelos's students. Thanks to all the levels they'd gained over the past week or so, the party was managing to put up a good fight. They'd grown enough that they were quite formidable now, not only with magic but also with weapons.

Still, it seemed like they were in a bit of a pinch right now—especially the captured female knight, who was being dragged closer and closer to a flower lined with fangs. She was on the verge of being devoured. The many teeth that lined the center of the flower thrashed about in a terrifying way, and the thing was spraying out a highly acidic mucus that assailed the nostrils with its stench.

If you let that thing drag you in, your life would be over—your body reduced to nothing but a mangled lump of flesh, doomed to be dissolved and turned into nutrients.

"HELP! I-IT'S GONNA EAT ME!"

"Hoarfrost Demise!"

Hoarfrost Demise was an area-of-effect spell. It was a heavily modified version of the default ice spell Diamond Dust, and worked by freezing the caster's enemies before ultimately shattering them, leaving them to disperse through the air as tiny crystals of ice.

It wasn't long until the beastblossoms themselves were completely frozen over, turned into magnificent ice sculptures. A single swing of the sword from

one of the knights was then enough to shatter one of the creatures at the slightest impact.

It almost looked like something out of a fairytale, the brittle ice sculptures forming a scene so beautiful that the party could scarcely believe it was the same battlefield they'd been fighting for their lives on just moments ago. Not that the knight who'd been saved was in any state to appreciate the beauty—her lingering terror had her on the verge of tears.

“Mr. Zelos! You saved us!”

“Thanks for holding the fort, Aleph,” Zelos replied, sounding exasperated. He scratched his head lazily as he went on. “So they thought they'd attack right from the break of dawn, eh? Certainly makes you feel fed up with things, doesn't it?”

“It's been day after day lately, hasn't it? I want to believe that today will be the last of it. What a slog it's been...”

“So—man-eaters, by the looks of it? They occasionally have some materials I'm interested in, so I'd like to dismantle them myself. Would that be okay with you?”

“Hmm...do you mind if we take the magic stones?”

“Not at all. I'm after something else anyway.”

Inspecting the shattered remains of the man-eaters, Zelos started using his knife to further break apart what was left of one particularly large individual, hoping to find what he was after. It didn't take long for his efforts to be rewarded.

*

Magimorph Seed (*New find!*)

A seed used by the man-eater beastblossom to reproduce monsters. Reproduces the genetic information of another monster to mass-produce it.

Turns back into a seed when the reproduced monster is

defeated, and begins to sprout into another man-eater.

An essential material for creating the body of a homunculus. Can also be added to healing medicines to significantly boost their effects, but has the side effect of giving the medicine a revolting taste and mind-altering properties.

*

I've never made a homunculus before, but I am kind of interested... What kind would I even make?

The creation of life was seen as taboo here. But Zelos, who was unaware of this, had started to think it might be nice to build himself an artificial life-form that could help him take care of the fields.

Still, he didn't have the right materials or equipment to make one yet, so he was just keeping that project on the back burner for now.

"What's that seed you have there, Master?"

"It's used for making potions. Well, there are some other ways of using it too, but...whatever the case, I wouldn't really recommend using it."

"Why is that? If it can be used to make healing medicine, then wouldn't there be a lot of demand for it?"

"There's a reason nobody wants it. The taste is...atrocious. It might actually be the worst-tasting thing in the world."

The reckless pursuit of knowledge could lead to tragedy. Zelos decided not to tell his students about homunculi—both out of a sense of responsibility for their lives, and out of his worry about what the knowledge could do to their sense of morality.

People who sought out that kind of knowledge occasionally crossed terrible lines in the name of research. In the worst-case scenario, they could even try to use humans as materials. Of course, if you were just doing that in a video game, it wouldn't be all that bad...but in the context of *reality*, things were very

different.

For now, Zelos decided to at least tell Celestina about the seed's use in potions. But there really wasn't much demand for medicine that tasted *that* bad. It was so foul that just drinking some was enough to make you sprint off at full speed, do a thousand sit-ups, bash your head against the wall a bunch of times, and cap it all off by dancing like a maniac while making strange noises. You'd never manage to sell it, that much was for sure.

"What are you going to use it for, then?"

"Well, for example, I make a bet with someone at the tavern, and force the other person to drink some if I win. Oh, I can't *wait* to see that. Heh heh heh..."

"Teach... You're seriously a demon, huh? What kind of messed up bet is that?"

It would be a bet with terrifying consequences. Even if whoever lost would end up..."happy," in a sense.

So went the messy morning of the party's last day in the Far-Flung Green Depths.

*

When midday rolled around, Zelos was puffing on a cigarette and surveying the campsite.

The knights were storing the pelts, bones, fangs, and any edible meat from the defeated monsters, while Zweit was using his magic to burn any meat not fit for consumption. Celestina had been helping out with that too just earlier, but she was resting to recover her mana now. Since the battle with the man-eaters, the party had come under attack from monsters five more times—and having defeated them all, the knights were looking about as tired as you'd expect.

The walls around the camp had been taken down, and the party was waiting for the carriages to come back to pick them up. Speaking of which...

"The carriages are here!"

"W-We can finally go home!"

"Huh? Wh-Why am I crying all of a sudden?"

“It’s been a long struggle. I’m not afraid of anything anymore...”

The knights were unable to hide their joy at the carriages’ arrival, which signaled the end to their hellish days in the forest.

“You say that, but the monsters around here are all weaker than the ones that live deeper in the forest, you know?”

Several knights replied at once: “Seriously?!”

This was the outermost edge of the Far-Flung Green Depths. The monsters here were comparatively weak—only about thirty percent as strong as the ones that appeared a little deeper in. There probably *were* still some things the knights should be afraid of, in other words.

“Didn’t you say you survived out here alone, in the middle of this forest, for a whole week, Mr. Zelos?”

“Oh. So *that’s* why he was so happy to see us miserable...”

“You can tell when Mr. Zelos snaps back to the mental state he was in during that week when his life was on the line—he turns into a madman. He didn’t even hesitate to get other people caught up in his antics!”

“I get what you’re talking about, but it’s a bit of a mouthful. How about we just refer to it as ‘the Zelos from back then’?”

“He was seriously enjoying our misery, wasn’t he? Really, though, at this point, I understand how he must feel...”

The rest of the party had started to look at Zelos with sympathy.

After all, each of them had gone through a similar experience themselves by now.

“Is all our luggage together? No? Well, then—knights, get to loading it up! It’s time to say goodbye to this hellhole!”

“Yeeeeaaaah!”

Motivated by Aleph’s words, the knights leaped to action. Each of them felt pure, unbridled joy at the prospect of finally getting away from this vicious forest.

The other knights, who by this point had arrived with the horses and carriages to pick them up, were astonished by what they saw. The party's armor, which had been brand-new just a week ago, was now badly damaged, and every member looked haggard. Yet despite all that, the party was giving off some kind of intimidating aura.

“Why are you all so beat up?! What *happened* to you over the last week?!”

They had the air of veteran soldiers about them now. Those who had come to pick them up—having themselves spent that time somewhere safe and quiet—had no way of knowing what had transpired. That the squad here had scraped through battle after battle with their lives on the line; that they had triumphed over ferocious monsters; and that every last one of them had, despite the odds, made it through alive. Only their comrades would be able to understand the trials, the fierce battles, that they had gone through together.

Paying little heed to the knights who had come to pick them up, the squad gleefully focused on loading their luggage. They wanted to get away from this place as soon as possible. Their hearts were united on that front, and they got through the task with incredible speed.

After all, they were fully aware: every minute they took getting things loaded was another opportunity for the next monster attack to begin.

Thirty minutes later, the party finally withdrew from the forest as if they were fleeing from it, their minds jumbles of thoughts and emotions.

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On the whole, the knights from the training party were in incredibly high spirits as the carriages jostled them from side to side.

After all, they were saying farewell to that carousel of combat—and heading somewhere nice and safe, where they could get a proper, comfortable sleep. As the forest disappeared into the horizon behind them, they felt joy from the bottom of their hearts, their expressions growing softer the farther they went.

They were about two days away from Santor, and they were set for a rocky ride in horse-drawn carriages all the way. But that didn't stop them from falling fast asleep before long.

In the Far-Flung Green Depths, you were attacked by monsters day and night, and the knights' time there had considerably worn on their minds. There was the constant, inescapable tension of knowing your life was always at risk—of knowing that when you *did* get attacked, you could end up in a chain of battle after battle, left with no idea of when you'd get your next moment of quiet or rest.

It had been an incredibly unpleasant situation, but that was just how nature was—it wasn't made for humans to handle. Human conceptions of the laws of nature really only held true in safe little *slices* of nature, and if you ventured even a step too far outside of them, you'd end up in a face-to-face battle that would show you just how cruel nature could really be.

If you died, you'd end up inside the stomach of a stronger foe, leaving not even a corpse. And if, instead, you won, you'd have to eat the weaklings you'd defeated, turning their bodies into your sustenance. It was an endless cycle in a ruthless, callous world.

The knights, however, had managed to make it out of there alive—and now, they could entrust their safety to others, give in to their fatigue, and heal.

The carriages rolled slowly along, approaching a rest site on the way to the city of Santor. It was a riverbank that Zelos and the others had stopped at on their way here.

But what they saw there now was a terrible sight. Something far worse than what any of them had been expecting.

“Wh-What the hell is *this*?”

“Broken carriages and dead merchants... Were they attacked by bandits, I wonder?”

Strewn about the riverbank of the rest site were sprawling bloodstains and countless bodies.

The bodies of merchants—and of the mercenaries who'd been guarding them.

“Come to think of it, Celestina and I were attacked by bandits about a month ago, weren't we? Are there a lot of bandits in this area?”

“No, that shouldn’t be the case. What lowlives have decided to make this their territory all of a sudden? And right when we least wanted to deal with them...”

Aleph heaved a sigh of irritation. There shouldn’t have been that many bandits around here. After all, it wasn’t uncommon to see monsters coming out of the Far-Flung Green Depths if you were near the forest borders. This was a dangerous area, even for bandits who were well used to forests.

“Captain. The bodies are still warm. It looks like they must’ve been attacked not too long ago.”

“What? If that’s the case, then...whoever killed them should still be nearby.”

Wherever the bandits were hiding, they’d probably want to be close to the waterfront. There was bound to be a base in the area that the bandits were using to hide their stolen goods, and that base would probably be hidden in either a rocky outcrop or a cave.

“Were there any caves around here? None that *I’ve* heard of, at least...”

“I remember back when I was a li’l kid hearing that there was a base around here for the...I think they called themselves the Macaca bandit gang? At least, I *think* their hideout was meant to be somewhere ‘round here...”

“Hmm... Whoever did this is probably using that old hideout, then.”

“Macaca” was a term used to refer to several species of macaques. Regardless, between bandits naming themselves after monkeys and the perverted white apes they’d had to deal with in the forest, the party seemed almost like they were fated to end up in primate-themed misfortune. Even if this latest group of savage monkeys was able to speak human language...

“Zweit, Celestina...get your familiars ready.”

“Hmm? Sounds like it’s finally *our* time to shine!”

“I’m guessing you want us to look for the bandits’ base from the sky?”

Wasting no time, the mages used their arcana and sent three familiars flying into the sky. Zelos summoned a sea eagle; Zweit, a falcon; and Celestina, a dove. They split up to search both upstream and downstream and got started with their bird’s-eye search.

It didn't take long until they spotted the figures of some bandits. In fact, it was surprisingly quick.

"Found them. Upstream. About...a thirty-minute walk from here, I think?"

"It...looks like they've taken women and children as hostages."

"Saving them as some entertainment for tonight, I suppose. You know, seeing them go above and beyond on being evil like that just makes me want to crush their dreams all the more..."

Zelos and the rest of the group were getting into quite the rage. The constant fighting—and the carnivorous diet—had left them on edge.

Bodies trembling with anger, they were making no attempt to hide the bloodlust on their faces. Some were beginning to vocalize their anger as well.

Making it out of the Far-Flung Green Depths alive had turned them into bloodthirsty demons.

"Those lowlife bandits... Gonna make us do *extra* work, are they? Heh heh heh..."

"We're gonna choke the life out of you, you fucking rats!"

"My mithril sword here's thirsty for some blood! Aha ha ha..."

"Isn't that just a regular steel sword? I get you, though..."

"Stop trying to show off—it's embarrassing. Let's just go deal with those cockroaches. If we wait around too long, we'll end up with more casualties..."

The knights from the training camp were united in their resolve. They were angry at having their long-awaited rest interrupted—and they were channeling that anger directly toward the bandits, turning them back into the demons they'd become over the past week. Their eyes shone with ferocity, like those of hungry predators.

"Whoa. These guys are nothing like they were just a week ago..."

"I guess battle really *can* make you go mad. What a horrible thing..."

Knights in battle were expected to represent their profession as a whole. But those who'd come back from the forest had essentially thrown away their pride

as knights and morphed into *warriors*, focused on nothing but combat.

“Knights, prepare for battle! We’re going to *slaughter* those damned bandits!”

“Yeeeeaaaah!”

Letting loose a battle cry from the riverbank, the knights charged into battle once again. They were eager to vent their anger, after all...

Nobody knew quite what had happened to the proud knights who had gone into that forest a week ago. But it was clear that they’d become a ferocious pack of beasts—and though the bandits didn’t know it yet, they’d made those beasts their enemy.

Energized, the squad began to march in the direction of the bandits’ hideout.

“Even Captain Aleph—what’s *happened* to him? And...does this mean *we* have to clean up the mess here?”

“I...think it does, yeah. Seriously, though, what’s gotten into all of them? They’ve all turned so bloodthirsty...”

“I don’t know—and I’m not sure I *want* to know. Honestly, I feel like it’s something I *shouldn’t* know.”

The knights who had come to pick the party up from the Far-Flung Green Depths were left behind at the riverbank. Every one of them was bewildered to see their comrades—who just a week before had been innocent, upstanding individuals—turn into savage warriors. For now, though, they had work to do.

Aware that they had to stop the pestilence from spreading, they got to work cleaning up the tragedy at the riverbank, grieving all the while. They were knights, after all; dealing with scenes like this was just another part of the job.

Chapter 4: The Old Guy Meets Someone in the Same Boat

When the girl had come to her senses, she'd been in the middle of a wide-open plain.

There had been nobody else there, and all she'd been able to remember was that just a few moments ago, she'd been playing the online game *Swords & Sorceries VII*. She'd somehow had a hunch, though, that her life had suddenly changed, and in a major way.

It hadn't taken long for that hunch to be proven right. She'd managed to open up a status screen, which had contained a message that confirmed it: she was in a new reality. Essentially, the message had told her that the gods of this new world had sealed away a "Dark God" inside a game from her old world, and that a curse let loose upon that Dark God's in-game death had caused numerous people to die for real.

The girl had then, apparently, been revived in this *new* world—given a body based on her old one, but with the stats of her in-game character.

Whatever the process, though, the gist was that she had died, and been reincarnated into an entirely different world.

The girl had been aware for quite some time that she was different from the people around her. Even back on Earth, she'd spent her time alone, failing to see eye to eye with her classmates. Her relationships with her younger brother and the rest of her family had been perfectly fine, but somewhere in her heart, she'd been longing for some sort of excitement.

Now she seemed to have gotten just that: her life had turned around completely. She'd found every day in her old world to be unbearably tedious—but here, in another world? Well, that changed things. She hadn't even known what kind of exciting new experiences she'd be able to find out there in this new world, but she'd figured there'd be *something*.

Her sense of adventure reaching boiling point, she'd gotten straight to taking her equipment out of her inventory and walking off through the field in search of a city. Along the way, she'd stumbled across a village being attacked by goblins, saved it, partied up with two mercenary women she'd met there, and joined them on a journey to the city of Santor, where she'd registered at the mercenaries' guild.

Since then, she'd taken on a handful of requests to help pay for her living expenses. And she'd been out on another one just now, having joined a merchant convoy as a guard on a round-trip journey through two cities. But just as they were on the way back, the merchants had come under attack from bandits.

And now she'd found herself taken captive by those bandits. She was in danger, in more ways than one.

Her name was Sumika Irie. Though in this world, she was going by the name of Iris...

*

"Iris, what do you think we should do?"

"For now, I think we just have to wait for an opportunity. Don't worry—I'm sure we'll get one before long."

"Really?"

"Uh...probably."

Going by her stats from *Swords & Sorceries*, Iris would've been around intermediate strength, as far as mercenaries went. That would put her at about a C-rank. It should have been more than enough for the simple task of guarding some merchants.

The problem was that there were *a lot* of bandits—and that the merchant family she'd been tasked with protecting had been taken hostage.

At the end of the day, Iris had spent her whole life until now in modern society. So while she hadn't been *trying* to do so, she'd seen this new world as if it were a video game. She hadn't realized that that naivete could get her into

trouble.

The bandits had kidnapped not only women but children as well—and now they were using one of those children as a hostage, to force a female relative of the child to strip naked before their eyes. They were truly the lowest of the low.

The woman was probably the child's mother, though it was hard to be sure. Whoever she was, though, she was silently taking off her clothes, trembling from fear and shame as she did so.

It was hard to believe that the men watching her with those vulgar eyes were even human.

I swear...I'll kill you all.

It was the first time that Iris had ever felt true bloodlust. She tried to stay as close as possible to her comrade, Lena—who was keeping an eye on what the bandits were doing from beside her—as she took a look at the situation around her.

It was then that her Scouting skill alerted her: there was mana in the sky up above. She took a closer look.

Are those...familiar? Are there mages watching us from somewhere?

Flying around openly in the sky above were a sea eagle, a falcon, and a dove. But however Iris went about appraising them, it was clear to her that they weren't living creatures. The word "familiar" floated into her mind. She figured that someone must be using these familiars to get a view of the situation.

Still, with her Appraisal skill at a low level, that was all the information she was able to get.

"Lena. I'm not sure, but...I think there might be help on the way."

"Really? But...why?"

"I think there are mages somewhere nearby. I can see some familiars, and they've probably noticed us. So whoever's there might come and rescue us before long. But..."

"But you're not sure exactly when—is that what you're trying to say?"

“Yeah...”

The familiars were unmistakably looking down at the bandit hideout. But it was impossible to say when exactly any help would arrive.

“In the worst-case scenario, the bandits could do some horrible things to us before help comes...”

“If we get out alive, that’s fine by me. As long as I can show these bastards my *gratitude* for what they’ve done.” Lena sighed. “If only they were pretty young boys instead...”

Lena was one of the first two companions Iris had made in this world, though she seemed to have some rather unusual proclivities. Her other new companion—Jeanne—wasn’t here right now. She was currently out with a cold, and she was resting at an inn in Santor until she recovered.

That wasn’t to say that Iris and Lena had been the only mercenaries here—another three had been with them as guards. But they had been a vulgar sort, and they’d made a terrible first impression.

Whatever the case, they weren’t here anymore. They’d lost their lives when the bandits attacked. Iris and Lena would’ve loved to have them back to help them fight their way out of this situation...but they were gone, and they wouldn’t be coming back.

Come on—if you’re going to save us, then hurry up and get here already! This could get really bad, and soon...

The bandits had begun to turn their vulgar, hungry gazes toward the pair. Sure, it seemed like there were some saviors on the way, but they had no idea of knowing when those saviors would arrive; perhaps the bandits would have their way with them before then. All they could do now was hope...

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Zelos and the rest of the party spent thirty minutes marching upstream, following the traces left by the bandits. Ultimately, finding the bandits’ hideout had been easy. There was a boat just by the river, and it looked like some of the bandits were loading goods onto it.

“So they weren’t just bandits; they were *pirates*, huh?”

“Does that mean they’d be from the Morbas gang?”

“I don’t know. But...I *have* heard rumors that some particularly nasty sorts have split off from the rest of them.”

“So, what—the rest of the gang started to treat them like traitors, so they ran off and came here?”

“I don’t care who they are. Let’s just destroy them!”

“I’ll make ’em scream real nice. Hee hee hee...”

It was hard to tell just who the outlaws were. The bloodlust emanating from the knights had continued to swell and swell, and it was just about ready to burst.

“What should we do about the hostages? They’ve got some women in the center of their hideout, and they’ve captured the children and some of the men as well...”

“Those bastards. They must be threatening the children to make the women strip for them.”

“Brother... Not that I’m *doubting* you or anything, but you haven’t been peeking on them, have you?”

“O-Of course not! This is an emergency, you know?!”

Celestina’s cold stare was brushed off in a hurry. It was, after all, an emergency. The longer they took to act, the more danger the hostages would be exposed to. There was no time to waste.

But Zweit was, after all, a boy of a certain age. He had an interest in the female body, and while it hadn’t been intentional, he’d found his eyes drawn to some of the women’s bodies while he was scouting. That would remain a secret, though.

“Should we start by paralyzing them? Like we did with the monsters?”

“Sounds like a plan. That just leaves the matter of how to get their attention on *us*...”

“Just surround them and wail on them from all sides, right? Heh. Heh heh heh... I’ll make them regret ever being born.”

“What about the poison? Should we use that as well?”

“There are kids in there too, you know! That’d be a bad idea.”

The knights were coming up with some nasty ideas. But up against bandits, there would be no fighting fair and square.

There was no good reason to hold back against such a despicable lot. And yet when most knights went to deal with criminals like this as part of their job, they avoided using back entrances and instead attacked straight from the front, which often gave the bosses of bandit gangs the opportunity to escape.

What was more, knights acted in large numbers. And by analyzing how long the knights spent planning their tactics, and how they were moving in the days leading up to an attack, the bandits could get a decent idea of when an attack was coming. Whenever a major bandit subjugation failed, that was often the reason—but even smaller bandit gangs could sometimes get a picture of what the subjugation squad was doing based on the movement of goods.

Specifically, by the time the Order of Knights was ready to start moving, money would already be flowing through the area from the purchase of goods; stockpiles of weapons, food, and more would be brought into the knights’ garrisons and strongholds; and their contacts could be seen loitering around. It was hardly a surprise that all that would put the bandits on high alert.

Informants willing to provide this sort of information were all over the place—and the bandits, of course, made good use of them. But there could always be unforeseen circumstances. And this time, the bandits had overlooked the existence of the knights who had headed into the Far-Flung Green Depths as guards. Knights who had become insanely strong over the past week.

There was no doubt that they’d pose a major threat to the bandits. After all, they were staring at the bandit camp with the eyes of bloodthirsty beasts—as if they were *looking forward* to what was to come—as they thought up the best plan for annihilating the gang. And now, they had just finished finalizing that plan.

“Mr. Zelos, please draw their attention as best you can. It doesn’t have to be for long—just until we can get them surrounded.”

“I might end up improvising a bit, depending on how things go. Is that okay? I’ll kill them if they attack me, of course...”

“What about the hostages? I’d like to save as many of them as possible, but...”

“It’ll probably depend on what the bandits do. I’ll try and play a convincing villain to buy you all some time, at least.”

“I’ll be counting on you for that, then. Well, let’s get moving. We don’t have much time.”

Zelos, the strongest one in the party, had been chosen to lead the charge. It seemed like the obvious choice.

“All righty, then; I’ll go on ahead and wait for you to start getting in position. You’d better be quick if you don’t want me to take all the prey before you get to them...”

“Leave some for us, please! I’ve got a real bone to pick with them...”

The knights had built up a bit of a grudge against the bandits for interrupting their long-awaited rest.

“These... These *are* humans we’re gonna be fighting, right? Did Teach seriously just call them ‘prey’?”

“I wonder if this squad even *cares* about the difference between humans and monsters anymore. It’s like they just see both as more targets for them to hunt. The bandits might deserve it, but they really do have some bad luck... Should we at least pray for them to be happy in the afterlife?”

“I *do* almost feel sorry for them, yeah. They’re all gonna get slaughtered, aren’t they?”

“Destroyed, yes. I don’t think anyone can stop the knights here now...”

The knights from Aleph’s squad had become monstrously strong in the span of a single week. What had initially been intended as a training camp for just Celestina and Zweit had taken no time at all to turn into a full-fledged battle of

survival, everyone there fighting with their lives on the line.

Their levels were almost triple what they had been upon beginning the journey, and their skill levels had gone up by a staggering amount as well.

At this point, it probably wouldn't even be an exaggeration to call them the strongest knights in the country. This humble squad had all of a sudden found itself becoming part of the elite.

If there was any problem, it was that they had started to lose their humanity...but that was a separate matter. For now, they had only one thing on their minds: their plan to annihilate the bandits.

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The bandits were loitering in front of a cave near the river, holding a feast as they picked through their spoils for the day.

Food, precious metals, and clothes were a given; the biggest prize was the *women*. Young married women, little girls, and the mercenaries—there was a victim for every bandit's preference. The grubby-looking men wore vulgar grins as they started to take a closer look at the women they'd captured.

They were getting the women to strip by threatening their families and lovers—and after that, the plan was to have fun with them in exactly the way you'd expect. The bandits were really looking forward to it. And of course, they had no intent of keeping their promises.

In other words, there was no way the bandits would let the men live. Once they'd served their purpose, the bandits would kill them—and when they'd finally had their fill of the women, the plan was to sell them off to slave traders.

The thought that they were just about to rape the women—about to relish in their shame and humiliation—brought twisted grins to their faces. They were basking in the joy of feeling like gods, and their lust was growing and growing as they imagined the cries their victims would make. At least, that *was* the case, until...

"Excuse me. Could you tell me where we are?"

"Hah?"

The leader of the bandits turned his head in the direction the voice had come from. What he saw was a single shabby-looking mage.

“You know, it’s kind of embarrassing, but I got lost along the highway, and I’ve been stuck wandering around the forest here for about the last month. Would I be able to get one of you to point me in the direction of the nearest town?”

“Pfft. Ya got eyes in that head o’ yours, mate? We’re exactly what we look like. Do ya get what’s goin’ on right now?”

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea, yes. After all, we’re not that different, you and I. So how about we help each other out a bit as accomplices of sorts, eh?”

That he was a mage wasn’t a problem for the bandits, in and of itself. But this *particular* mage seemed awfully suspicious.

He was a middle-aged man of medium build, wearing a somewhat dirty gray robe. He had scruffy hair, grown out long enough that you couldn’t see his eyes, and it didn’t look like he bothered to shave. All in all, his appearance alone made it clear that he wasn’t exactly part of respected society.

Gray robe, huh? Shouldn’t be anythin’ special, then...

The bandit leader’s brain told him that the man before him wouldn’t be dangerous. He sent a signal to one of his underlings.

“Not sure I believe ya. Are ya really gonna call us yer ‘accomplices’ after seein’ *this*?” He gestured to the captives.

“Looks like you’ve had some pretty good finds. You know, I’d love to have one for myself—to use in my experiments, that is. Heh heh... I don’t suppose you’d be willing to give me one or two?”

The bandit men would have their way with women until they were ragged shells. But they wouldn’t *kill* them; even those shells could be sold for decent money. Yet here was the mage before them, seeing those same naked women and calling them nothing but materials for use in his experiments.

The bandit leader revised his judgment: this mage was more dangerous than his looks let on. More dangerous than he’d been expecting.

“That so? Well, ya wanna take one back with ya, then? Ya’ll ’ave ta wait ’til

we've 'ad our fun with her, though."

"Hmm... Sure, I'm fine with that. As long as she's alive, that works for me. There's a lot of stuff I want to try out, you see..."

A dark mage, huh? Ya can never trust that lot. We'll just 'ave ta deal with 'im...

The term "dark mage" was a general term used not to refer to mages who excelled at dark magic, but rather to those who wouldn't balk at committing horrible crimes for the sake of their research. They were a dangerous lot, indiscriminately using humans and animals alike for their experiments as they tried to quench their thirst for knowledge.

Specifically, dark mages were only interested in the *results* of their experiments, and would stop at absolutely nothing to reach those results. They were the worst kind of criminals, doing it all out of a morbid sense of curiosity. Even the bandit leader had never expected to run into one for real.

He knew, however, that engaging in that research would inevitably require money. And if the mage here needed money, then it stood to reason he'd be willing to sell information about the bandits.

From what the rumors said, dark mages would even massacre entire crowds of people if you hired them to, all for just a meager amount of coin to go toward their research. The bandit leader reasoned that getting rid of the man here would be the safest option for him and his gang.

"Yer gonna 'ave to wait around while we're havin' our fun, all right? Pass the time with a drink or somethin'."

"Oh, that sounds nice. I actually haven't had anything decent to drink lately. Have you got anything good?"

"Yeah—took some real quality stuff from some merchants."

"Oh, I'd love to try some! Heh heh heh..."

The mage was shadiness personified. Still, it didn't change what the bandits had to do. One of the men came over and sidled up next to him.

"Got some space for ya! Come sit with me!"

“Sorry for interrupting you all. Right when you were about to have some fun...”

“Hey, no skin off our backs. Heck, you should ’ave some fun too—in hell!”

Following a plan they’d devised earlier, one of the bandits attacked the mage with a knife from behind. But the one who collapsed wasn’t the mage—it was the bandit. Suddenly the knife was buried deep in *his* chest. The mage flashed the rest of the gang a calm smile.

The bandits had no idea what had just happened.

“Oh? Seems like one of your men decided to retire early tonight. Is it your bedtime already?”

“Wh— You! What the *fuck* did you just do?!”

“What, you ask? One of your friends decided to give me a bit of a present, but I didn’t need it, so I politely declined and gave it back to him. That’s all. More importantly...you shouldn’t treat human life so lightly, you know? Though I guess it’s a bit late to be telling you that now...”

The men could almost feel the air suddenly freezing around them. Rivers of cold sweat began to flow down their backs, and they started to feel like they had just made a terrible, terrible mistake.

That feeling was right.

“I *tried* to negotiate with you, okay? *And yet*...you turned your weapons on me. So surely you can’t complain if I kill *you* now, right? You know, I can never have enough materials for my experiments... Heh heh heh.”

“N-No! Yer wrong! We didn’t mean ta—”

“I *saw* you send the man here a signal just before, you know? Or did you think I wouldn’t notice? Amateurs, I swear... Why on earth would you send a signal when you’re standing right where I can see you? What’s the point? Anyway, just something to think about for next time. If you *get* a next time, that is...”

Utterly aloof, the mage—Zelos—stared fixedly at the bandits. Determined to play the role of the villain as best he could, he decided to launch an attack at the bandits, no further questions asked. Just to buy time for the knights, of

course.

“Gale of Shredding Snow.”

A gust of wind blew through the bandit gang. In barely an instant, several of the men were torn to pieces and scattered around the campsite, almost as if they were disassembled mannequins. They hadn’t even noticed it happen.

Fountains of blood stained the ground red. The camp was filled with the metallic scent of blood, stinging the bandits’ nostrils.

“N-No incantation?! Yer kiddin’! Such a high-level mage—”

“Such a high-level mage would never be in a place like this’ —is that what you were going to say? It’s unlikely, but it’s not impossible. And as long as it’s not impossible, you can never rule it out. There’s no such thing as absolutes in this world. Looks like you need to go back to school.”

The bandits screamed in terror.

Zelos pointed his arm toward a group of bandits who’d started to flee and snapped his fingers in their direction. They, too, were turned immediately into nothing but another pile of corpses.

Specifically, he had used the close-quarters combat skill Snap Fingers to flick pebbles toward the men at high speed. The pebbles had shot right through their heads like tiny bullets.

A wave of despair washed over the remaining bandits, who had just seen their comrades killed in a flash. They realized now that the man who stood before them was *not* one to be trifled with...but that realization had come far too late.

“Hmm. Wonder if I should thin their numbers some more? I should be fine as long as I leave a few alive, and it’ll be a pain to hand them all in if there are too many left...”

“Fuck, ya work for the state?!”

“No, no, I was just passing through. Then when I saw you, I thought I may as well use you all for a bit of an experiment.”

“So— So yer sayin’ yer gonna kill us all for an *experiment*? Why?!”

“Who knows? *You* lot certainly don’t have to worry about it—you’ll be dead soon anyway. And I don’t see why I should have to just stand here and answer the questions of someone who tried to kill me.”

Having already earned the hostility of the mage before them, the bandits had only two options left: kill or be killed.

In fact, maybe “be killed” was their only *real* option at this point. There was no getting out of it.

“Do you actually think you’re all some sort of strategic geniuses or something? Hate to break it to you, but you’ve been incredibly careless, if I may say so myself. You’re no better than amateurs.”

“I don’t wanna hear that from someone who looks as shabby as you!”

“However I look isn’t really relevant here, is it? If you feel tricked by my appearance, that’s your own fault. Let me guess—you saw my gray robe and assumed I was weak, hmm? But what made you so confident that any mage wearing a gray robe would be from around these parts?”

Zelos’s guess was right: the bandit leader had assumed he was weak after noticing his gray robe. But that logic only applied to mages from *this* country. And by the time the bandit leader had realized the error in his judgment, the whole bandit gang’s lives were firmly within Zelos’s hands. Faced with a mage who was capable of casting spells without the need for incantations, they couldn’t even run. They were fully aware that as soon as any of them tried to move, they’d have magic fired at them and become the next ones to die.

The bandit leader scanned his surroundings, and took notice of a small boy nearby.

He dashed toward the boy, hoping to take him as a hostage to help him get out alive...and was just beaten to the punch by one of his subordinates, who stole the boy away himself. Apparently they’d both had the same plan.

“I-If ya don’t want the kid ta get hurt, then—”

“You’re being a pain. Would you mind just disappearing for me? *Stone Bullet.*”

The bandit’s head was blown clean off before he could even finish his threat.

“Trying to take a hostage, eh? Did you really think that would work against me?”

“Th-The kid’s done nothin’ wrong! You coulda killed ’im with that!”

“That’s awfully rich coming from you. Besides, what does that mean to me? I told you—I’m happy as long as I can do my experiments. You’re just my targets. Do you get it? Were you actually listening to me earlier?”

A shiver went down the bandit leader’s spine. The mage here was simply using him and the other bandits as target dummies for his attack spells; whether they had hostages or not was of no concern to the man. The bandits began to realize that there was no way out. That they were going to be killed without mercy.

Of course, that wasn’t much different from what they had been doing themselves. All that had changed was that they had gone from being the hunters to being the hunted.

Aware now that they had nowhere to run, the bandits were cowering in fear. Zelos looked over at them with a bold grin and lit a cigarette. At first glance, it looked like he was full of openings—though in reality, there wasn’t a single one for the bandits to capitalize on.

“Hmm... I guess it’s about time. Just like we planned.”

“What?”

The bandit leader failed to understand the meaning behind Zelos’s words. But right as he was thinking they sounded suspicious, he realized that he was starting to feel something wrong with his body.

Specifically, he was gradually becoming paralyzed, and his body was beginning to tremble. He was finding it hard to move.

“What...have ya done ta...?”

“Nothing at all. At least, *I* didn’t do anything to you...”

“*You* di... Wait. D-Don’t tell me...ya got others...with yugh...?!”

“Looks like you’re having trouble speaking now, mm? Well, it’s just a paralyzing poison. Doesn’t work on *me*, though.”

As the bandit leader looked around, he saw the other bandits' bodies beginning to convulse in the same way as his own and collapse to the floor.

The knights had apparently unleashed an incredibly potent paralyzing poison from upwind.

"Harhahyhing hoihon? Wh-When hih...hu...?"

"I can't even tell what you're saying anymore. Can you speak a little clearer for me?"

"Harhahyhing hoihon...i'hn...air...!"

"It...isn't *fair*? Is *that* what you're trying to say? Do you really think any of *you* have the right to say that someone's not playing fair? You've used plenty of dirty tricks yourself, so why did you assume your opponent wouldn't do the same to you?"

Bandits attacked the weak, stealing their goods and their women. And when you went up against cowards who never played fair in the first place, it was simply good sense to use even dirtier, more dastardly tactics yourself. If you could incapacitate your opponents without even fighting directly, there was no way you'd pass up the opportunity. Still, though, it seemed like the paralyzing poison was starting to affect the hostages as well. It was having such a strong effect that Zelos was starting to wonder whether the knights had prepared it wrong.

While it wasn't as if *he'd* deployed the poison himself, Zelos was starting to feel kind of guilty about it.

"There's no need for formalities when you're fighting against scum. The only outcomes are kill or be killed. That's how you've all done things as well, isn't it? Like with the people you killed just earlier..."

It was poetic justice. The bandits had done all sorts of dirty acts, and now, they were simply having even fouler play leveled against *them*. Just having some paralyzing poison spread through the air had ultimately been enough to render them powerless and rid them of their control.

When you were going up against the sorts of lowlifes who stole the lives and fortunes of others, you had no obligation to fight fair. And *certainly* no

obligation to let them escape with their lives. The knights had no qualms with that sort of thinking now—and here they came, taking advantage of the opportunity to attack.

The handful of bandits who could still barely move ended up getting slaughtered for their futile efforts at resisting.

And just like that, the bandits, who only minutes ago had been so full of themselves, were completely suppressed.

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“Tch! None of them put up a good fight.”

“We managed to put them down, so it’s fine, isn’t it? What were you hoping for, anyway?”

“I wanted to *slaughter* them, obviously! I wasn’t expecting the poison to leave them *that* powerless...”

Okay, these guys are crazy...

That was Iris’s first impression of the knights.

Not only had her “saviors” sent in a mage who seemed liable to kill everyone there, hostages included, at any moment, but he’d also been followed up by knights who were perfectly fine with spreading poison about the place. It had well and truly ruined the girl’s mental image of knights.

Their readiness to use any dirty tricks they could in order to win left Iris feeling fear, not relief. It wasn’t at all what proud, gallant knights ought to do. What was more, the poison had even affected the women being kept as hostages. It *did* at least seem like the group had also prepared an antidote to counteract the paralysis, so apparently they were paying *some* consideration to the hostages...but it was still a horrible trick.

“Iris... These knights are kind of scary. They’ve got some real nasty ways of doing things.”

“Yeah. But...they *did* save us, I guess.”

The knights were going around and mercilessly killing the paralyzed bandits, their faces twisted in ecstasy as they went. One knight even shouted, “There

are too many of these bastards; let's cull 'em a bit!"

There was no way that anyone who enjoyed killing so much could be a decent person. It was only natural that Iris and Lena would be wary.

But what interested Iris most of all was the unexpected strength she'd seen from the mage.

What he'd used to defeat the first bandit was not magic, but martial arts. The moment the bandit had struck, this mysterious mage had twisted his arm, capitalized on the opportunity to steal his knife, and then plunged that knife straight into the man's heart, all while keeping his composure.

It had been about a month now since Iris had come to this world, but she hadn't heard of any mages fighting in close combat like that.

Somehow, she found herself unable to take her eyes off the man.

That was when he came over to her. "Oh? A Runewood Staff, eh? Whose is that?"

"O-Oh! That's, uh, mine..."

A pause. Thinking. And then, from both of them...

"Hmm?"

Zelos and Iris locked eyes.

"This is something you get from microtransactions, isn't it? As part of a gacha..."

"Yeah, I got a gacha ticket when I was starting out, and it gave me this. It's super powerful!"

Their eyes met again.

"You got *that* from your new account bonus? Lucky you. Well, I can make them myself, so... Wait."

"Microtransactions? Gacha?"

It was as if time had stopped just for the two of them. What their words meant was that, essentially...

“Are we...from the same place, perhaps?”

“So you were a player too, Mister?!”

When the DreamTech home console connected to the internet, it automatically accessed the manufacturer’s servers, allowing the player to adventure through vast lands online. And without going into an in-depth explanation of how it worked, the game let players pay real-world money in a “gacha” system to get equipment and items for online multiplayer.

By paying for gacha pulls, you were able to get powerful equipment at random, making the early game so much easier. But you could also get a lot of duds; it wasn’t uncommon for the gacha to give you items that were even weaker than what you could get by just playing the game.

Regardless, the point was that with gear like that—and her knowledge of terminology from back on Earth—it was clear that the girl wasn’t originally from this world.

All of a sudden, though, the pair’s conversation was interrupted by the sound of excited porcine screams in the distance. They turned to see what the noise was coming from, and saw a single orc on the horizon. Aleph, who was standing next to them, got a bad feeling at the sight.

“M-Mr. Zelos!” a knight said. “An orc! But why would it be here...? A-And it’s about twice as big as usual!”

“I hate to say it, but it’s probably part of a larger horde that’s come out of the forest,” Aleph noted. “From the looks of it, I’d say it’s a scout...but something about it seems kind of strange, doesn’t it? Whatever’s going on, I don’t think it’s anything good.”

The knights’ faces turned pale in an instant. They were meant to fight bandits; they hadn’t expected they’d have to deal with more monsters out here.

While something about the whole situation didn’t seem quite right, the most likely explanation was that this was an advance scout, with a proper horde of orcs some distance behind it. Right when the party had to take the hostages somewhere safe, it was looking like they might have to deal with *another* monster attack. Even Aleph seemed troubled.

It wasn't just the victims they had to worry about—they needed to turn the remaining bandits in to the authorities as well. All in all, it was starting to seem that this might be more than they could handle.

What was worse, Aleph's expectations had been off: more and more orcs were already starting to appear. They hadn't been far behind at all. Something really *was* off about this.

"I'm getting a bad feeling about this," Zelos muttered. "We might just have to leave the bandits behind. They'll be a pain to deal with anyway..."

Zelos's words brought huge grins to the knights' faces.

"Yeah, that sounds good. We *do* have to prioritize protecting the victims, don't we...?"

"Whether some bandits live or die doesn't have anything to do with us. Come on, let's hurry up and retreat!"

"Wait—there's still so much I want to talk about! Mister, don't tell me you—"

"Save it for later! For now, we need to get out of here."

Grabbing Iris's hand by force, Zelos joined the rest of the party and started to retreat from the hideout.

Leaving behind the bandits, who were still paralyzed.

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"We're saved! Who woulda thought we'd be saved by *orcs*... Wait, wha—?!"

Still unable to move his body as he wanted, the man was shocked to notice an orc placing a hand on his pants.

Then, with all the force it could muster, the orc tore those pants right off.

"I-I'm a *guy*! Why the fuck is an orc going for *me*?!"

"Wait! Shit! These ones 'ave four tits! They're— They're *lady* orcs!"

Their lower halves stripped bare naked, the bandits could do nothing but stare at the joy-tinged porcine faces of the orcs. They had no idea what was about to happen to them. No—more likely they *did*, but they just didn't want to believe it.

The orcs, meanwhile, let out mighty *oinks* of glee.

Orcs often reproduced by having the males go out and assault females from other species. But the males were constantly fighting, causing their numbers in the orcish hordes to dwindle.

And so, on rare occasions, when there weren't enough males left, the female orcs would venture out themselves, looking to assault males of other races to bolster their numbers.

This wasn't an advance scouting party; it was a pack of female orcs who, for whatever reason, had run low on virile males and decided to go find those men for themselves.

It wasn't just the *male* orcs who had incredible reproductive abilities; it was the females as well. All they needed was to find some men for their seed. When they did, those seeds would be...well, that shouldn't need explaining. Orcs were also omnivorous, so once they'd gotten what they wanted, they'd kill and eat the bandits.

In short, the bandits had been sorely mistaken: the orcs had never had the slightest intent to save them.

As of that night, the bandit gang was never seen again.

As Zelos was running away with the others, he thought he heard a loud noise—something between a scream and a moan. It was the last time any humans would hear the bandits. They had fallen victim to primitive beasts, ending up as mere tools for breeding. And it wouldn't be long before they were killed and eaten. A fitting end for such a monstrous group of men.

While it was poetic justice, it was almost enough to make you feel a bit of pity for the men. Still, at the end of the day, they'd lived by survival of the fittest, lording their power over others. They hardly had the right to complain when it happened to them.

If you lived by the idea that might made right, you were signing up to follow that same rule yourself. It'd always come back to get you sooner or later. And there would be nobody to save you.

Chapter 5: The Old Guy Tells His Life Story

After defeating the bandits, Zelos and the rest of the party made their way back to the riverbank, where they decided to spend the night.

Celestina and Zweit went to sleep early, while Zelos and some of the guards took turns on lookout duty to keep everyone safe. As tired as they were, they couldn't let their guard down; you never knew when monsters could appear and try to capture people.

After their week in the Far-Flung Green Depths, the knights' senses had become almost as sharp as those of wild animals, waking them up if they sensed even the slightest presence. The problem was, even if that presence only ended up being a bear or something, they'd set out and start to hunt it with glee. They'd gotten *too* used to the wild.

Zelos was warming himself by the bonfire as he sorted the medicinal herbs and other things he'd collected from the Far-Flung Green Depths. That was when he noticed the girl coming up to him.

It was Iris. The girl from earlier, who was in the same situation he was—both of them forced to live in this new world due to the carelessness of its four goddesses.

"Mister, um...middle-aged guy, whatever your name is? Can we talk for a bit?"

"Middle-aged, huh? Well, I guess you're not wrong. I *did* turn forty just this year. Actually hearing someone say it kind of hurts, though..."

Zelos didn't particularly mind the fact that he'd reached middle age. But hearing it straight from the mouth of a youngster like Iris made it sting a bit, somehow. He was at a sensitive age.

"Oh. I thought you'd be older than that. Anyway, that's not important. There's something I wanted to ask you."

"‘Not important,’ she says... It's a pretty delicate subject for me, you know. By

the way, just to make it clear—I'm not into little girls. So if you're going to ask me to be your sugar daddy or something, then sorry, I'll have to decline."



“What the hell?! No! Why is *that* the first thing you think of?!”

“A girl about your age came up to me on the street not too long ago and asked me if I was interested in that sort of thing. I said no—as politely as I could—but do you know how she responded? She clicked her tongue at me and said, ‘Stop trying to be such a Goody Two-shoes, you fucking geezer.’ I must admit, it traumatized me a little...” He let out a sheepish laugh.

“Don’t just lump me in with her! You’re making things awkward! And that’s something that happened to you back in Japan, right?”

Iris was a little indignant at the assumption that she was trying to lure him into being her sugar daddy. The fact that his mind had gone there right away was more proof that he really *was* from the same society as her, but at the same time, you couldn’t blame her for getting angry.

“Besides,” she continued, “what even made you think I was here for *that*? I can’t believe you!”

“Look, I’m happy to be wrong! I just thought I’d start by mentioning it, just in case.”

“Why are you so suspicious of me anyway? Don’t tell me you got tricked by a girl my age in the past or something?”

Iris was wearing primarily dark clothing—specifically, something known as a magic dress. She had her hair in pigtails, topped by a little pointy hat. Her style was overall on the fancier side, lacking somewhat in practicality; it made her seem less like the sort of mage you’d usually see around these parts and more like the classic image of magic users from Earth’s folklore. She wore a barely useful cape that only stretched about halfway down her back, but it looked kind of childish on her, so she wasn’t particularly happy with it.

“Anyway, you’ve got a pretty fancy aesthetic going there, don’t you? I can’t imagine it’s all that practical, though.”

Iris grimaced a little. “My character was originally a tall, beautiful woman with a nice body, so...this was about the only kind of thing I could equip. Besides, what about *you*?! You look like you’re still wearing the starter gear! It makes you seem shady!”

“It’s on purpose. I ended up becoming a tad more famous than I would’ve liked, you see. So I started dressing like this as a sort of camouflage.”

“You still look suspicious, though. It’s kind of, like, how do I put it...? Like you’re an extra from some movie, and you’ve gone out and started walking around the streets in costume. Like you’re out of place. And the shady way you talk doesn’t help! Honestly, it just makes you seem *weird!*”

“As I was saying, that’s fine by me! Well, the way I speak is more of a bad habit... I had to watch how I spoke when I was looking for work, and it ended up kind of creeping into my everyday speech. It’s too late to do anything about it at this point.”

As Zelos was saying, he’d tried to speak more politely back when he was first looking for work, and it had ended up influencing how he talked outside of work as well. But when a scruffy-looking middle-aged guy of medium build talked in that kind of polite, wishy-washy way, it just came across as incredibly suspicious, as if he were hiding something.

Zelos actually quite *liked* the image that gave him—though that perhaps spoke to the twisted nature of his personality more than anything else.

“Oh? What kind of work were you doing? I’m kinda curious now.”

“Well, mostly stuff to do with online security systems. Creating firewalls, making programs to counter hackers and track them down—that sort of thing.”

“Whoa! Are you actually super smart or something?!”

“Uh... Just a reminder, I’m not up for the whole sugar daddy thing, okay? Sorry, but I’d rather not commit a crime...”

“I *told* you, that’s not it! Stop apologizing like it’s a serious thing! It’s not!”

Back in Japan, Zelos had worked at a particular company for about seven years. His life back then—or the life of Satoshi Osako, as he had been known at the time—had been smooth sailing. He’d been placed in charge of several projects, taken a leading role in significantly boosting company profits, and even gotten involved in a handful of projects with major multinational corporations.

At least, that *had* been the case, until a certain incident had forced him to leave the company...

“Sounds like you were pretty amazing. But if you were so good, why’d they fire you? I don’t understand, if you were doing so well...?”

“Ah. I thought that might be coming. You see...I’ve got an older sister. She’s quite the pain to deal with, and—well, I was living in company housing back then, but she took advantage of the fact that she’s my sister to come over and stay at my place. Worse, she stayed there for three years without even *trying* to move out.”

“Seriously? If she’s *your* older sister, she should’ve been an adult for ages already, right? Was she unemployed or something?”

“Oh, she did have a job. At one point. But she quit it before long to get married...only to get a divorce shortly after. Right after she emptied out the guy’s entire savings account...”

“You’re kidding!”

Zelos’s sister—or perhaps it was more accurate to call her *Satoshi’s* sister—was a rather selfish individual. When the siblings’ parents had died, it had apparently only taken her two years to spend away her entire half of the inheritance. That was how careless she was with money. And she’d done the same thing with her husband’s bank account, using it all up without even asking him.

It wasn’t just grounds for divorce—if worse came to worst, it could’ve been a matter for the law. But she’d also found out that her husband was cheating on her, and she’d dug up plenty of dirt on that to stop him from making a big thing over the money. If anything, she was such a schemer that she’d managed to paint herself as the victim in the relationship and drive her husband into a corner. That was when she’d come bursting into Satoshi’s company housing uninvited.

She ended up spending the entire three years there happily unemployed, simply shutting herself inside the apartment, watching TV and eating. Satoshi had managed all of his banking himself, so he’d been able to stop her from having free access to his money. Having never trusted his sister in the first

place, he'd set up strict security measures around his own room, and even kept his banking documents hidden in a safe-deposit box at the bank itself.

"What kind of older sister *does* that?! She sounds terrible. More like a parasite than a person..."

"Yeah. She'd even order takeout without asking and make me pay the bill. Not to mention, I always found her snooping around the place for money with the excuse of 'cleaning up,' and trying to break into my room... Terrible's definitely the word."

"Didn't you try and kick her out? Or talk with the police, or get help from a lawyer, or...*something*?"

"I did. But the problem was, she's good at making herself look like a nice person to anyone who doesn't know her, and getting rid of obstacles in the way of what she wants. Every time something happened, she'd make me look like the bad guy. She was a nasty piece of work."

Outside of the apartment, she'd played the role of a proper older sister; then at home, she'd been a tyrant. She'd gotten along well with all of the other women living in the company housing, making sure to never give off a bad impression.

But finally, after three years of that hell, Satoshi had gotten word from his company that they were transferring him to a different location—allowing him to get away from his sister. Fortunately for him, the company housing at his new location had only had rooms for singles, and it was only men that lived there. Even better, it was an unwanted run-down apartment, twenty-five years old and cramped enough that even living there alone was a challenge.

In other words, there hadn't been any way for his sister to move with him. He could still remember the sight of her furious glare when they'd gone their separate ways.

"She never had the slightest intention of working, but she was always keen on spending as much money as she could. Honestly, if I saw her in this world, I'd kill her as soon as I got the chance. Wouldn't even feel the need to leave a corpse."

"Was that really the end of it, though? It doesn't sound like she was the sort

of person to give up that easily...”

Iris was right: that hadn’t been the end of the whole saga. Satoshi’s sister had specifically waited for a time when he was overseas for work; appeared at his new dormitory, pretending the timing was just a coincidence; and tricked the place’s manager to get into her brother’s room. Then, once she was in, she’d copied the data of a program he was developing and stolen it. What was more, she’d remarried by that point. And as Zelos explained:

“The man she married was some higher-up at a rival company, and they ended up taking the stolen software and releasing it before we could. Anyway, the point is, my sister’s got a real talent for causing trouble.”

“She sounds awful! Like, the worst sister you could get! I guess you had bad luck with your family...”

Of course, Satoshi’s company had made a patent application for his new program—and so when the code was stolen, they took it to trial. A trial that they had won, thanks to key evidence that the released program had copied Satoshi’s code right down to the bugs. But Satoshi had still been fired, taking the blame for the problems caused by his troublesome sister.

Incidentally, the higher-up that his sister had married at the other company had been fired in the aftermath as well. The whole situation was just a nightmare; nobody had come out ahead.

In the wake of all that, Satoshi had bought a plot of land out in the countryside and found someone else to manage the apartment he’d been left by his parents—he’d even gone so far as to fool his sister by sticking up a sign with a made-up company name written on it.

That had been the beginning of Satoshi’s laid-back life in the sleepy countryside, his days whiled away on a farm. It had also given him plenty of time for gaming—and while that was something he’d always enjoyed, he’d actually found himself enjoying his quiet new life even more than he’d expected.

Eventually, Satoshi’s sister had found out about that new life of his. She’d tracked him down and appeared at his place again...but only once, and then never again. Apparently that one time had been enough for her to judge that

she'd never be able to get used to life on a farm.

"Wait—why am I giving you my whole life story, anyway? Oh, and by the way, are you really okay with that equipment you've got on?"

"This was the only stuff that fit me. I want to get some armor as well, but I don't have the money for it..."

"Ah, that makes sense. I suppose you've only got access to whatever your character was wearing and whatever you could make yourself. We didn't even get any money when we were brought here, did we? And even if you manage to find all the right materials yourself, you still need money to make things..."

"The rest of my gear was all sexy-looking stuff anyway. There's no way I'm wearing that. It looks wrong on me."

"So you're trying to earn some money as a mercenary and buy some equipment that way, is that right?"

Zelos surmised that the girl had probably enjoyed playing *Swords & Sorceries*, and that she'd been the type who didn't come out of her shell much. That she had a strong sense of curiosity, but a poor sense for danger. That she'd been born into an entirely normal family, with whom her relationship was neither particularly good nor particularly bad. That she'd had few in the way of friends, and an intent to make the most out of this situation she'd found herself reincarnated into.

"What are your thoughts about this world, by the way?"

"Mmm... I guess I'm half happy about going to an isekai, and half sad about not being able to see my family anymore."

"Oh. What I meant is...don't you think it's weird? Almost everything here works the same way as it did in *Swords & Sorceries*. Sure, there are a few little things that are different, but there's just too much overlap between the basic systems here and the ones in the game."

"Seriously? You're not just trying to mess with me, right?"

"Yeah. In fact, now that I think of it, there are all *sorts* of things that seem strange. Some of the new spells that I made with the other high-level players,

for example. They shouldn't have actually worked, from a game balance perspective."

"Huh?"

Zelos's in-game party—the Destroyers—had teamed up with some other crafting addicts in a mad effort that had ultimately brought about new spells made up entirely of zeros and ones, not the usual magic letters. But thinking realistically, the game's programming shouldn't have let players just make new spells like that and slot them into the code that made up the game's world. In the eyes of the Destroyers, the new spells they'd made were nothing but viruses or bugs resulting in system errors; there was no way the system should've *accepted* them. And even if it *did*, then...who had designed and built in the visual effects that played when you activated the spells?

Furthermore, even if it were technically possible to run AI for NPCs who thought in almost exactly the same way as humans, the servers shouldn't have been able to process all that data. And yet the servers had continued to run without issue, allowing all of the players—Zelos included—to explore the game world to their hearts' content. Normally, all of that would have left people with some real questions about how the whole thing worked. But somehow those topics had never been raised, even in the corners of the internet.

"Do you see what I'm saying? Normally, people wouldn't have just accepted it all like that. It was just too ridiculous, too implausible, on a system level. But apparently nobody even *thought* to raise any doubts about it. It's almost as if..."

"As if...what? I'm kinda scared to ask..."

"As if the thoughts of us players were being controlled somehow. Isn't that how it seems to you? The only explanation I can think of is that the very world we were living in was stopping us from having doubts about *Swords & Sorceries*. And then when I came to another world, I finally *did* start to have those doubts..."

"Th-That can't be right! Even if it *was* something like that, then who'd be able to pull off such a crazy— Wait."

"It's probably...yeah. Not that I want to believe it, mind you..."

Both of them had reached the same conclusion: that it was the goddesses of this world who had created *Swords & Sorceries*, and that they'd somehow lured the people back on Earth into playing it. That was the only explanation that even remotely made sense. *Maybe* you could have tried to explain it all away as some project where the government had put all of its resources into making a cutting-edge video game...but the system for the game had been made by an overseas company. Speaking of which, nobody ever managed to remember the *name* of that company...and even if it had been a big multinational corporation, things still wouldn't have made sense. Nothing added up.

"Can you actually remember the name of the company that made *Swords & Sorceries*? I can't, at least. And yet I'd never even thought of that as being unusual until now. Despite the fact that they made such a revolutionary system... So that's another thing that's weird."

"Y-You're right. You'd think that if someone made technology that let all five senses work in a digital world, there'd be all sorts of uses for it. But it was only ever used for this one game... It doesn't make sense, does it? But still, why did the game work the same as this world?"

"I can't say for sure. But my best guess is that whoever made *Swords & Sorceries* based it on information from this world. If that was the case, then things would make sense."

"You're talking about some pretty insane stuff here—you know that, right? Usually, anyone'd think you were crazy..."

"The situation we're in is crazy enough already. We've been *reincarnated*! In *another world*! Speaking of which, it's hard to believe that I died. I've even got the same old scars on my body. Which is another thing that's weird..."

It was all the kind of thing you'd usually laugh off as a crazy conspiracy theory. But after they reincarnated into a fantasy world, it was hard for the two of them to call anything impossible.

After all, they were already in an absurd situation. If they were able to accept *that*, then they should be able to accept all sorts of other nonsensical phenomena as well.

"Well, thinking about it now isn't going to give us any more answers. I don't

have any concrete proof or any confidence. By the way, are you...”

Seeing the way Zelos was staring at her, his expression just so *serious*, Iris started to panic and struggled to put together a response.

“Wh-What? What are you... What are you asking?”

“Are you seriously going to keep being a mercenary?”

“Of course! I never thought I’d get the chance to have so much fun. I’ve heard this world even has dungeons!”

“You could miss out on your chance to get married, you know? People here get married at seventeen. Once you reach twenty, you’re late to the party.”

“Get off my back! I’m sure I’ll find a good guy by then.”

“Well, I won’t stop you from dreaming.”

Zelos let out a listless puff of cigarette smoke.

What he’d *actually* wanted to say was, *Are you sure you want to live in such a brutal world?* But he’d stopped at the last second, figuring that whatever life advice he tried to give her wouldn’t sound convincing from a man who was only a few weeks away from being unemployed.

Besides, I’m not exactly living a respectable life myself; what right have I got to tell other people how they should be living their lives? Not that that’s stopped me so far, I suppose...

He’d already had a huge influence on his two students. It was a bit late to start worrying about that now.

“Well, I guess I’ve already gotten involved at this point. If you ever want advice on something, just ask; I can at least do that for you, okay?”

Iris paused and shot Zelos a cautious look. “You’re not getting any weird ideas again, are you?”

“Don’t worry. I’m a boob guy. But hey, if you come back with a bigger chest when you’re older—you can try and seduce me then, okay?”

“Grrr... I’m sensitive about that, you know! Besides, you’re going on about giving me advice or whatever, but you still haven’t even told me your name...”

“Oh, I already know *yours*, so that’s fine. I heard it when that other lady was talking to you earlier. She called you...Eros, was it?”

“It’s *Iris*, you moron! Anyway, what’s yours? I haven’t heard it yet.”

It was only now that the two of them realized: despite all that had happened, neither of them had formally introduced themselves yet.

“I’m Zelos. At least, that’s what I’m called in this world. And it’s not like my old name’s really important anymore.”

“‘Zelos’... Wait, seriously? You were the Black Destroyer?!”

“Well, that’s the first time I’ve heard that *particular* nickname...”

“The Black Destroyer” nickname stemmed from the fact that Zelos’s strongest equipment was all pitch-black, giving him quite the striking appearance when he wore it. For whatever reason, each of the five Destroyers had had their own color, like they were sentai heroes or something—their leader, for example, had been clad in full crimson. So each of them had ended up being referred to by their particular color, followed by the word “Destroyer.”

What was more, apparently this was a recent thing, and Zelos himself hadn’t been aware of it.

“Having a nickname like that feels kind of chuunibyou; I’m not sure I’m a fan. I’m far too old for that sort of thing...”

Those years were a long way behind him now. Feeling a little down, Zelos let out a puff of cigarette smoke to try and brush it off, but it didn’t really help. His cigarette for the night ended up tasting bitter, and he felt a sense of emptiness spreading throughout his body.

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The next morning, the carriages set off for Santor once again.

Sitting in the frontmost carriage, Zelos handed a lesser sagestone to each of his two students.

These lesser sagestones were leftovers—sagestones that Zelos had failed to make properly when he was working toward the creation of Dark Judgment, his wide-area annihilation spell. They’d ended up going unused, and he still had a

bunch of them just sitting around in his inventory, so he'd decided to reappropriate them.

Even lesser sagestones like these were convenient items. They were able to store several spells and could be used in place of spell scrolls.

"Master? What's this?"

"One of my original spells. Just like I promised, I'm giving it to each of you, so please learn how to make good use of it."

Zweit was curious too: "What *are* these things, though? Magic stones? Are they meant to work the same way as spell scrolls?" A moment's pause. And then: "Whoa. It worked. 'Divine Silver Barricade'? I've never heard of it before. Probably because it's an original spell, I guess. But...is it a defensive spell?"

"What you do with it is up to the two of you to decide. It'll be a good trump card if you get good enough at using it, so I'd recommend you spend a lot of time training with it."

Zweit and Celestina got straight to manifesting the spell's magic formula and etching it into their subconsciouses. Zelos had actually used this spell in front of them once before—but the two of them had been fighting against different monsters at the time, so they didn't remember actually seeing him use it. The fact that you could make it transparent had probably contributed as well.

Once the pair had etched the spell into their subconsciouses, the magic formula floating before their eyes shone, and the copy of the formula stored inside the sagestones vanished.

"What?!"

"You're kidding! It just...*vanished*?!"

"Oh—back when I first made this spell, I built something into the formula so that as soon as you embed it into your subconscious, the recorded version deletes itself. I wouldn't want to risk anyone just finding it somewhere and copying it, after all."

The fact that the magic formula had disappeared meant that if the students wanted to teach the spell to anyone else in future, they'd have to write the

formula back down themselves.

But Divine Silver Barricade was made up of a vast collection of magic letters, and its formula was incredibly dense. It was hard to interpret what kind of spell it even was just from looking at it, so trying to pass it on to someone else would require writing out an enormous magic formula without understanding what it even meant. And its use of data compression only made it look *more* complex and intricate. Even if you looked at the projected magic formula, it was hard to make out anything but a shining cube.

“If you want to pass this spell down to your own students at some point, you’ll have to make something to store it in yourselves. Though I don’t think you’ll be able to decipher the magic formula in the first place. Or, well...maybe you will, if you work hard enough. Humans are always growing and learning, I suppose.”

“Crap...I don’t understand *any* of it. Why is it even a cube in the first place? No *way* I’m understanding that.”

“To think you could make something like *this* out of a magic formula... You continue to amaze me, Master!”

The spell had a layered, compressed sigil, made up of tiny magic letters. Zelos’s custom spells were in the realm of indecipherability. If you *did* want to try to decipher them, you’d have to go through the proper procedures and break them down bit by bit—and if you failed, the sigil would scatter and disappear.

Celestina and Zweit saw Zelos’s magic as a sort of mysterious, advanced form of art, and felt incredibly honored to have had some of it bestowed upon them. But Zelos was almost completely unaware of just how much of an influence he, as a Great Sage, could have on those around him.

“By the way, while you *can* use this spell for defense—as you’d expect from the ‘barricade’ in its name—you can also change it into whatever shape you want. Whether that’s a shield, a sword, or anything else.”

“Does that mean that you could stretch it out or turn it into a field of spikes? Oh—is this the one you used in the forest, Master?”

“Full points, Celestina! You’re right. So yes, the answer is of course you *can* use it like that. But if you can’t control your magic well enough, it’ll just be a regular shield, so it’s going to depend on your training.”

“It’s a cool spell, but it sounds tough to control. If you want to change its shape quickly, I’m guessing you’ve gotta be able to imagine exactly what you want, right? I feel like there’d be a lot of different ways of using it, though.”

“One more thing—if you get good enough at using it, you can make it transparent, or turn it into little projectiles to fire at your targets.”

It was so versatile that it almost seemed insane to call it just defensive magic. It was offense and defense in a single package—and what was more, you could even use it for indirect attacks by doing things like sending your barrier flying toward an enemy, if you were quick enough about it. The one and only drawback was that the strength of the barrier depended on the user’s own talent.

The caster’s mana control and the size of their mana reserves had a big impact too, since making the barrier stronger required a lot of mana. Of course, you could make things easier by drawing external mana from nature, but it’d still just be a regular barrier if the caster’s level was low. It was the kind of spell that called for a lot of practice if you really wanted to master it.

“So if we’ll have to keep getting stronger and stronger if we want to get the most out of this thing, huh?”

“It certainly sounds like we could turn it into a trump card. I’d like to try it out right away, but I’m not sure exactly how much mana it uses up...”

“That’s the kind of thing we’ve just got to get the hang of, isn’t it? No one’s gonna know the exact numbers, and it’ll be different for everyone.”

One way or another, the two of them wanted to test out the new spell as soon as they could.

It’s nice to see them so energetic. Ah, to be young... I wonder if I really should look into making myself younger again?

If you wanted to regain your youth in this world, you’d need one of two wonder drugs: either a temporal rewind potion or a youth restoration potion.

Drinking a temporal rewind potion just once could lower your body's age by about twenty years. And what was more, it didn't have any side effects. The issue was, it was a pain to collect the plant-based ingredients required for making it. At present, Zelos had just one of those ingredients, and even if he had all of them, he didn't have the rest of the materials anyway.

The other option was the youth restoration potion—but that one came with a bit of a problem. Using it revitalized the cells in your body, temporarily making you younger again. But as a side effect, you'd suddenly grow decrepit a few years later.

Since the cells in the human body are only able to divide so many times in a person's life, forcibly revitalizing the cellular structure of your body served to shorten your life span. And the lower the quality of the potion, the more pronounced that negative effect became; frankly, it wasn't something Zelos wanted to use. He'd actually made some with his friends back when he'd been playing *Swords & Sorceries*, but they'd pretty much just been useless joke items.

Well, I guess I can keep being an old guy for a while yet. I don't really need to be younger right now, and I actually kind of like this shady appearance of mine, in its own way...

That was one factor, at least. But there was also the matter that he just couldn't be bothered to keep up with personal grooming. As a bachelor, he'd gotten used to getting away with things like that; there was nobody around him to complain if he looked like a slob. It was a bad habit he'd gotten into after being fired.

Zelos liked to think of himself as young at heart, and he *was* reaching the age at which the gradual decline of his body was starting to bother him. Still, he didn't want to do anything that was too much of a pain. Perhaps it was a sign that he'd spent too long living as a shut-in—long enough to have become a bit of a good-for-nothing.

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As Iris sat in one of the carriages, she looked out at Zelos, who was in the carriage ahead.

She'd become curious about this middle-aged man, who was in the same

situation she was and who had formerly made a name for himself as one of the top players in *Swords & Sorceries*.

It was clear based on her experience in the month she had been a mercenary that Zelos was far more powerful than any other mage in this world.

After all, even *she* was starting to gain a reputation as a high-level mage, making it clear that those who had been reincarnated had a big advantage over the knights and mages born in this world. So if Zelos had been one of the almighty Destroyers in game, then she couldn't even fathom how much of an impact he'd be able to have in *this* world, with its lower power standards.

Either way, having him as a comrade would be incredibly reassuring. Not to mention, Iris had looked up to high-level players like the Destroyers.

She let out a sigh.

"Hmm? What's the sigh for, Iris?"

"Lena... Ah, I was just wondering whether there's any way of getting that guy to join our party."

"What, that middle-aged man? Is he really that impressive? More so than you?"

"He's...probably the strongest mage in the world."

Iris's recent experience had taught her just how dangerous a mercenary's job could be.

However high your level was, if you hesitated to kill someone even once, your enemies would take advantage of the opportunity.

There was probably something wrong with you as a human if you had no qualms about killing. But at the same time, you wouldn't be able to make it as a mercenary if you couldn't kill people. Not everyone out in the big wide world was going to be kind.

"I guess you can't judge people by their appearances, huh?"

"Yeah. It'd be pretty reassuring to have him as an ally, you know? Which is why I was trying to think of a way to pull him in. But it's kind of tough..."

It seemed like Iris was giving serious thought to the matter.

“Hey, Iris...”

“What?”

“However strong he is, should you really be going after some old guy like that? What are you going to do if he’s got a family?”

“What? I don’t *think* he’s got a family, but...still, what’d be the problem with that?”

“I mean, he’s *old*! There’s a huge age gap between the two of you, and while I’ve heard of noble couples with age gaps like that sometimes, I’m not sure *you* could pull it off. You’re all flat and squishy, and you’ve still got the body of a kid... He’d get arrested if went around with you, you know?”

“Hey, what do you *mean*, the body of a kid?! I’ll have you know, I’ve at least got *some*— Anyway, that’s not what I’m trying to do!”

Iris had finally realized that Lena was misunderstanding things.

“I get that you might have some feelings for him because he saved you, but...I mean, just look at how scruffy he is!”

“I *told* you, it’s not like that!”

“You were having a nice little chat together last night, weren’t you? Seemed like you were really getting into it. Enjoying yourselves, I’m sure... Honestly, not a bad effort for a little flattie like you!”

“Knock it off, Lena!”

“I never would’ve expected you to have a thing for older guys, though. I’m shocked, really! Astonished!”

“Even if I *had* felt anything for him yesterday because of the adrenaline, that wouldn’t still be affecting me now! That’s not how that works! And seriously, you’ve got the wrong idea, okay?!”

But despite Iris’s protests, it didn’t seem like Lena had any intention of stopping.

She’d gotten completely caught up in her own delusions, and her mind was

starting to run wild. She was barely even listening anymore.

“Oh— Watch out for love syndrome, okay, Iris? You could end up actually trying to sleep with him if you’re not careful.”

“What do you mean, ‘love syndrome’? You’re making it sound like I could go into heat or something. But I’m not an animal, you know! That’d never happen!”

“It *does* happen, though. People going into heat. Wait—you’ve never heard of it before?”

“Huh?”

Humans in this world could go into heat. The phenomenon that caused it, commonly referred to as “love syndrome,” made people essentially go into heat as the result of a domino effect that started when the mana running through their veins synced up with their minds in just the right way. It was also a seasonal thing, to an extent, but it wasn’t like people affected by it were entirely controlled by the biological instinct to preserve their genes.

Essentially, the brains of both men and women afflicted by love syndrome would subconsciously look to leave behind superior offspring by searching for a highly compatible member of the opposite sex. The individual’s mana would then resonate with the wild part of their mind in a powerful way, causing their lust to go into overdrive.

Those affected by the phenomenon didn’t choose their targets based entirely on strength and ability; they usually tended to go for individuals who fit their personality and preferences. Of course, that included any fetishes as well. The rising tides of the individual’s lust would cause their mana to resonate with that of their target, and their animalistic instincts would override their usual sense of reason.

It was a nuisance of a phenomenon, potentially even leading to social death if it drove you to make some sort of grand, embarrassing confession.

Based on all that, you might expect love syndrome to wreak havoc on society—but most of the time, it worked out surprisingly well. Still, it could fail if one of the pair’s mana remained unaffected by the syndrome.

Zweit was a good example: he had been well and truly rejected, showing that love syndrome didn't always work out. However much he himself had wanted Luceris, he hadn't actually had anything she was looking for, dooming his love to end in heartbreak. That had then encouraged him to try and get closer to her through *force*—which was, of course, a crime...

If someone affected by love syndrome noticed the signs of it early and managed to form a couple with their target in advance, they could avoid the rest of the symptoms. But there was always the possibility of the phenomenon coming on suddenly, causing you to fall in love at first sight and make a scene out of it in public, like you were in a real-life soap opera.

It wasn't uncommon, then, to see passionate outbursts of love in crowded downtown areas. In this world, that was accepted as just another seasonal event of sorts, specifically in the period from early summer to early fall. And of course, a number of those outbursts would fail magnificently, leading the afflicted to suffer a social death.

"N-No way! *Please* tell me you aren't being serious!"

"Nope. Serious as anything. It's not that bad, though—if it gets you into a relationship, things are pretty much guaranteed to go well from there!"

"You're kidding... I don't want to end up like that!"

"People also call it 'Angel's Mischief' or 'Cupid's Whim,' by the way. It seems like everyone who gets it starts thinking some pretty weird things. And I've heard it gets *particularly* bad for mages..."

"Crap! Doesn't that mean I'm in huge danger?!"

As a mage, Iris would inevitably have strong ties between her mana and her mind, making it highly likely that she'd spiral out of control if her mana resonated with that of another person. And of course, the affliction, if she got it, would try and drive her to get into a relationship with a man she was compatible with.

This can't be real! Oh, but...even if I did end up coming on to a guy, it'd probably be someone I'm compatible with, right? Still, I think I'd just die if I somehow ended up making some embarrassing proposition that middle-aged

guy...

Love syndrome was a rather extreme phenomenon; it brought together the individual's instinct and reason in just the right way to make them act almost as if they were drunk. It could cause a pretty big domino effect, occasionally leading men to take multiple women as wives or vice versa. But for some reason, it had never ended up in a bloodbath.

Perhaps that was because the phenomenon brought together people with similar natures; each person's mana would be in tune with the other's reasoning and instincts, making it easier for them to accept what the other did. And humans were, at the end of the day, pack animals.

For the first time since she'd arrived in this world, Iris was feeling properly terrified. In the worst-case scenario, love syndrome could make her do something incredibly embarrassing right in public. And to a girl of a certain age, that was the one thing she absolutely wanted to avoid. She'd expected that the people here might be different from what she was used to; it was a whole other world, after all. But she'd never expected that there'd be such a thing as humans going into heat. Especially as a sort of inescapable natural phenomenon...

There were still a couple of days left until the group reached Santor, and Iris would spend the whole time tormented by her worries.

Chapter 6: The Old Guy Provides Guidance

Two knights were seated in an office of the Order of Knights.

The first was the head of the order, Marcus Virton. He was a knight in the prime of his life, with a well-trained physique that made him seem the very definition of a hardened military man. The other was Aleph Gilbert, the captain of the squad that had headed into the Far-Flung Green Depths on an escort request from the Duke of Solistia.

Marcus had approved the request as a way of providing some experience for knights whom he himself had trained. But the results were beyond what he had expected.

"I read the report, but I can barely believe it. Did you really reach Level 154 in such a short time? What sort of life-threatening situations do you even have to go through to manage something like that? It just sounds...staggering, you know?"

"It's all as we've written in the report. We spent every day fighting deadly monsters. And somehow, we all managed to all make it out with our lives."

"Goblins and orcs are one thing, but... Ogres? Trolls? Chimeras? Man-eaters? Aleph, I'm amazed you made it back alive."

"It...wasn't easy. We had to kill if we didn't want to be devoured. Our lives were constantly on the line—in more ways than one, mind you..."

Aleph's eyes went distant for a moment.

Still in disbelief, Marcus continued to scan through the report.

"So you had your food stolen on your second day, hmm? And had to spend the rest of your time there surviving off the wilderness? I'm amazed you survived, really. It sounds like I was close to losing an excellent talent."

"It was all because of the good knights under my command. I don't believe I'm all that strong as an individual."

Securing food was difficult in the Far-Flung Green Depths. For example, even if you just wanted meat, there were a lot of creatures that weren't fit to eat—especially trolls and chimeras. So Aleph's matter-of-fact answers about such grueling situations left Marcus unable to hide his amazement. It had only been a matter of days, but Aleph looked so fierce now that he was barely recognizable as the same man he'd been before.

What do you even have to go through to get like that? He's a changed man, that much is obvious...

Aleph's whole body gave off an impressive aura. He had enough gravitas about him to intimidate his foes, almost like a wild animal, all while maintaining his ability to reason—and the sight left Marcus trembling in a mix of shock and pride.

After all, it was Marcus who had trained Aleph up. He had been an excellent student to begin with, but now, he had come back from the journey looking even stronger than Marcus had expected. It had Marcus feeling overjoyed, like a parent seeing their child grow up before their eyes.

But as he flicked through the knights' report, he came across a line that was enough to make him splutter. He'd reached the section about the party's battle with the red greed battlewolf.

"Aleph? I-Is this some kind of joke? Or is that kind of thing really wandering through the forest?"

"It's completely true. That thing would...probably pose a real threat to us, yes."

"For sure. If this is true, then it's terrifying. But..."

"I know you might not want to believe it. But you can't avert your eyes from the truth forever."

The red greed battlewolf was a brutal monster. Your average mercenaries wouldn't stand a chance against it.

It was a real troublemaker, systematically forming packs with other monsters similar to itself and hunting alongside them. Even if the Order of Knights went up against it, they'd have to be prepared to accept a significant number of

casualties.

Whether you were a human or a wild animal, monsters that coordinated themselves that well were a significant threat. The leader was overwhelmingly powerful, and it would fortify its defenses by surrounding itself with agile, savage-fanged lesser species. Those lesser enemies worked together to corner their prey, and would be difficult to deal with even *without* the big leader.

Goblins and orcs had similar habits, potentially posing a threat greater than any other foe if they came together in large enough numbers.

“So you’re really not joking here, right? If something like this attacked a village bordering the forest, then...”

Thinking about the potential casualties, Marcus found himself unable to stay calm.

“If multiple of the leftover high-ranks formed a pack together, they’d definitely be a threat. If it’s just one, though, we should be able to repel them. But I imagine the problem is that there could still be *other* red greed battlewolves out there, correct?”

“Yes. If things like these are just out and about, then there might already be other victims we don’t know about. I wish we knew more, but...I don’t know of any scholars willing to go into that damned forest to study its monsters. Even if we *did* try to send out a research expedition, we’d just risk losing more lives in the process.”

“There probably *have* been other casualties we’re not aware of, yes. I don’t think such powerful monsters would usually appear around these parts, but if there was some particular reason for it, it wouldn’t be impossible. For example, if they were being chased by something even stronger...”

Every year, there were reports of villages where every resident had suddenly disappeared, and requests to search for people who had gone missing. But pack monsters from the forest never stayed in the same place for long, making it difficult to capture them. And even if you *did* manage to track them down, they were astoundingly strong. It wasn’t the sort of mission that regular mercenaries would be capable of; any who tried would just end up as more names on the list of victims.

“I don’t even want to *think* about that. For now, I’ll contact the mercenaries’ guild and warn them to be careful. We can’t afford to lose any more lives to this. Still, I’m not sure the mercenaries will be able to resist the promise of rare materials...”

“Warning them sounds like a wise decision. That way, if they ignore you and end up as prey anyway, it’ll be their own fault.”

“The other problem would have to be these—the crazy apes. The white ape pelt can sell for a pretty impressive price, so the mercenaries will probably set out to find some the moment they find out about it. Really, goblins and orcs are bad enough; now there’s another one as well? We’re too short-staffed for this.”

The need to defend against crazy apes would be yet another thing for Marcus to rack his brain over going forward. They were ridiculous monsters, but they were still trouble.

While only a few types of monster were capable of using humans and other such species as tools for breeding, it wasn’t uncommon for those monsters to come out from the forest and terrorize human settlements. And mercenaries were citizens too; if the order didn’t disclose its newfound information, the number of victims would only continue to rise.

On the flip side, the release of the information would likely prompt some to try and rise to the challenge, only to fail and end up victims themselves. But in that case, the blame would be placed on the victims themselves for being too weak. The world of mercenaries was a harsh meritocracy.

“Thank you for all of your hard work, Aleph. I’m sure you’re tired. You can go home and make your wife happy now.”

“This is my job, after all. It’s fine. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, though.”

“We’ll hand a portion of the proceeds from the materials we sell over to you and your knights before long. Sorry about making you come in today.”

“Yes, I’m definitely looking forward to a rest. That forest was hell.”

“I’m sure it was...”

As Aleph left the office, Marcus slumped over his desk, his head in his hands.

“Am I...really going to have to explain all this? The red greed battlewolf alone would’ve been enough to give me a headache. I swear, it feels like this forest is getting more dangerous as time goes on. Anyway, I’d better get to it...”

Thinking about the work that lay ahead of him left Marcus with a heavy heart.

If red greed battlewolves continued to appear, he wouldn’t be able to get away with just issuing an advisory level.

Sure, the report had said that the battlewolf had been defeated, but it was always possible that there were more.

The knights wouldn’t be able to stand a chance against packs led by red greed battlewolves unless they responded by sending their *own* elite. And in the unlikely event that a pack like that *did* attack a human settlement, everyone who lived there would probably be devoured, leaving nothing behind—not even bones. That was just how brutal, how *gluttonous*, those monsters were. And of course, there was one more troublesome problem that Marcus would have to report as well...

Shortly after his meeting with Aleph, Marcus disclosed the new information about the Far-Flung Green Depths to the mercenaries’ guild. But upon hearing about the crazy apes, the mercenaries’ guild just laughed. And as a result, many mercenaries ventured out, confident and in high spirits, to tackle the challenge of the Far-Flung Green Depths.

That went to show just how much appeal there was in the prospect of getting your hands on a white ape pelt, which traded at some impressive prices. But many of the mercenaries, having made light of the knights’ warning, would never return.

Later, higher-ups from the mercenaries’ guild would end up desperately bowing their heads before the Order of Knights, begging them to go out and search for the mercenaries who had disappeared. But it wasn’t a request that Marcus was willing to take on.

After all, the blame sat squarely with the mercenaries for not heeding the knights’ warning...

Three days had passed since Zelos and the others had made it back to the city of Santor.

Celestina and Zweit were, as always, in the middle of a combat training session against golems. Though now they weren't just fighting mud golems: there were some *stone* golems in the mix as well.

The pair had now gotten to the point that they could defeat stone golems, albeit in a close fight; their levels and skills were incomparable to what they had been just a week or so before. Their movements didn't seem quite as unsteady now either.

The week they'd spent on the border between life and death was paying off.

Zelos watched over the two while they fought. "Experiencing actual combat really does change people, doesn't it? Helps you get a proper feel for what's really important."

And as usual, Creston was watching alongside him. "About what level would you say these stone golems are? Your mud golems appear to be moving awfully well too..."

"I've kept the average to about Level 100. Still enough to be dangerous in a drawn-out battle, but to make up for it, I've taught them *that*."

"*That*, you say? Well, well, it certainly does sound like they've had some promising growth! I can already see my faction rising in influence. And I'll be sure to enjoy the shocked faces of those fools who looked down on Tina..."

It sounded like Creston was interested in bringing his grandchildren into the fold of his own faction.

As he was part of a ducal house invested in the future of the country, it seemed clear to Creston that he had to do something about the conflict between the Order of Mages and the Order of Knights. And if his faction recruited the two young mages—who were capable of deciphering magic letters—it would gain more influence with which to actually effect change.

Not to mention, they were relatives of the royal family. It wouldn't be that easy to just disregard them.

Having had that all explained to him by Creston, Zelos replied, “Sounds like you’re trying to pull some strings again, eh? Still, I feel like there would be some people out there who wouldn’t be too happy about you and your faction gaining more influence...”

“Worry not; that’s what the underworld is useful for. We’ve got a system for dealing with that sort of thing under direct control of the royals, you see. I imagine they’d be thrilled to lend us a hand in reforming the country. Especially since it would allow them to get some revenge for whatever grudges they have against each of the nobles.”

“I might just be thinking into things too much, but what if the people you’re up against are connected to some sort of underground organization themselves? There are all sorts of ways of sending assassins, after all.”

“*Pah*. We’re well prepared for that. And that textbook you improved for us will help us in cornering those who’d be in charge of that sort of thing, I imagine. We’ll begin by aiming for small victories.”

“You said the magic formulas in there were made by mages from one of the other factions, right? They would’ve been so much easier to use if whoever it was had just left them alone rather than doing a shoddy job at tinkering with them... I struggle to understand why they even did something so stupid.”

“To outsiders, they like to appear as if they’re serious about their research. But the lion’s share of their funding ends up going not to research but to bribery. Thanks to that, those among them who *are* serious about research end up destitute. At which point, I imagine not only were they unable to optimize anything, they were forced to follow ill-considered orders that led them to worsen the spells.”

“That sounds like a bit of a vicious cycle. Is this country really going to be okay?”

Even putting internal politics aside, the Magic Kingdom of Solistia was sluggish when it came to defense, each little squabbling group getting in each other’s way. If an enemy nation attacked, the country was liable to simply collapse right off the bat. There was probably nobody in the country who *wasn’t* worried about that.

“It certainly is a concern—which is why we must play our hand now, while we still have the chance. What fool of a man put the country in this state to begin with, I swear...”

“That’s what I want to know. What even *happened* for things to turn out like this?”

As you might expect, it had all started with a single mage handing out bribes to influential nobles in a grab for political power. But as soon as *one* person did something like that, everyone else only had two real options: either rebuke them for their wrongdoings, or join them in committing those wrongdoings yourself.

This...isn’t going to turn into a war, is it? Spare me that sort of trouble, please—I really don’t want to get caught up in something like that...

At this point, you would undoubtedly run into opposition if you tried to undo the wrongdoings of the past. And that opposition would likely have no qualms about committing heinous acts if doing so would protect their own interests or safety.

“Fear not; we are already on the move. We have turned your improved magic into scrolls, and begun selling them within the city. The beginner spells are already available for sale, you know!”

“If you sell decent spells for cheap, the factions won’t have a leg to stand on anymore—is that your plan?”

“That it is. We have also been able to win over a number of mages who were driven out of the other factions. And *that* magic formula has been rather outstanding. To think that such a thing would exist...”

Solistia Trading—a company under the umbrella of the Solistia ducal family—had already begun selling Zelos’s Gaia Control construction magic, as well as a range of optimized basic spells. The first customers to buy those spells were primarily builders, but it seemed like sales were doing well overall.

Mages could make a decent income by selling either spell scrolls or alchemical potions. But those were also their *only* real options. And the factions those mages belonged to would collect about a sixty percent cut, which went to

supporting the factions on an organizational level.

Now, though, Delthasis, the current duke, had begun selling scrolls containing Zelos's optimized magic at shops that he ran as a side business. To the factions, that was the worst-case scenario: something that threatened to shake the very foundations of their power.

The Solistia ducal family was, after all, a leading trader in the country, not to mention relatives of the royal family. It wasn't something the factions would want to make an enemy of.

"We owe you our gratitude. That erasure formula you incorporated is truly useful; with that, we needn't worry about the magic spreading with abandon."

Zelos had worked a bit of a trick into the spell scrolls that were to be sold.

Specifically, he had made it so that once a mage embedded the spell into their subconscious, the formula written on the scroll would disappear entirely. That made it possible to prevent any risk of his spells spreading out of control.

"Well, yeah; once you've learned a spell, the scroll is just a nuisance to keep around, after all. So I thought that collecting the empty magic paper after the customer's used the scroll could help with the sales pitch while also getting us some decent profits. Magic paper's valuable, so it's nice to be able to recycle it."

"We shall be sending you a portion of the revenue too, you know? I've already asked a money lender in our territory to set up an account for you. You needn't worry about living expenses."

"That should help keep me afloat for a while, yeah. I'm curious to see just how much I'll get in the way of royalties, though."

"We're now in the process of developing your land as well. Work is underway on the foundations for your home. Your Gaia Control magic is already proving exceedingly useful."

Creston had first learned about the magic Zelos had used at the church from Celestina, after which he had proposed the idea of selling it. And while Zelos didn't intend to distribute his magic around willy-nilly, he'd managed to hide the spell's true potential from everyone by limiting how it could be used. By

now, it had grown popular enough that even farmers were buying it.

By using Gaia Control to dig holes and harden the surrounding earth, or to create gutters—using it for assorted construction work, essentially—Zelos had made it look as though the spell would have no practical use in combat. Furthermore, even if the magic spread wide and far, the formula would disappear from each scroll after it was used, eliminating the risk of the spell leaking to outsiders. While it was always possible that mages could buy the scrolls themselves, those who could already use earth magic saw no need to buy one in the first place. Perhaps for that reason, Gaia Control had begun to spread through the common populace. Even if regular people with small amounts of mana *did* try to use the spell for other purposes, it was unlikely to pose much of a threat. And likely because of that, the Order of Mages and Order of Knights, having forgotten about the power of the masses, didn't see any reason for concern.

After all, even farmers had started to use the spell, so the elites of society saw it as nothing but rudimentary magic for beginners.

"More importantly, let's keep our eyes on their training. You've got plenty of combat experience yourself, so I think your feedback could help them out. My own knowledge is a little...slanted."

"Yes. I may be old, but I can still be of use. And nothing would make me happier. Especially for the sake of my beloved grandchildren. Their futures seem so bright..."

Zelos retorted in his mind: *You mean your beloved granddaughter, not your beloved grandchildren, don't you?*

There was a lot he wanted to say. For now, though, he decided to turn his attention back to his students' training.

"These bastards' attacks are as nasty as always. And it's so hard to get through their defenses..."

"It *is* difficult to beat the stone golems' defense, isn't it? At least they're slow."

"Yeah. Still, they make up for it with *that*..."

The stone golems were able to use their defensive prowess to protect the other golems, allowing the mud golems to launch attacks from the sides of the battle. And while the golems trying to encircle the pair was nothing new, breaking out of that circle was more difficult now. The stone golems had better defenses than the mud golems, making it impossible to take them out in a single hit.

Worst of all, the stone golems could attack indirectly as well. They were able to break their bodies down into the countless stones that formed them, then send those stones flying through the air as projectiles.

“Here it comes!”

“Tch! *Mana Shield!*”

The floating stones shot toward Zweit and Celestina like bullets. But Zweit managed to form a magical barrier in response, protecting the pair barely in time.

“Stone Shot... It’s difficult to deal with when they use it point-blank like that.”

“Yeah. It’s easy enough to tell when they’re gonna use it, since the stones start to float, but the way it hits a big area makes it tough to avoid.”

“Even if the mud golems get hit by it, it doesn’t even damage them, because they’re made of mud.”

“We’ll have to just destroy their cores. These things have got being a pain down to an art.”

There were two types of mud golems: the thicker ones, which made up the core of the attacking force, and the slender ones, which were capable of indirect attacks. They also coordinated with each other. The stone golems then complemented that further, serving as the cornerstone of the golems’ defense to create an impregnable battle formation. You wouldn’t be able to defeat the golems unless you destroyed their cores, but the formation’s defense made it difficult to actually do that. Not to mention, the golems had high regenerative capabilities; if you did a halfway job of destroying them, they’d be able to regenerate over and over again as long as their cores were intact.

Celestina and Zweit’s trip to the Far-Flung Green Depths had made them

much stronger. But at the same time, their training had gotten a lot more difficult, and the golems were attacking in more complex ways now.

“If there were *fast* golems here as well, we wouldn’t even stand a chance, would we?”

“You’re right. But it’s fine to fail here, and we get some decent experience out of it either way. Could be worse, right?”

“That’s true. Anyway, I think it’s time to give *that* spell a try!”

“Yeah, let’s do it!”

Both of them cast the same spell at the same time: “*Divine Silver Barricade!*”

As long as you had mana, Divine Silver Barricade would keep up a barrier for you, and you’d be able to control its shape as you desired. Celestina extended hers out into countless spikes to decimate the enemies in front of them, while Zweit changed his own into a massive sword to cut down the golems to their sides.

With the stone golems around, a drawn-out battle would only tire the two of them out. So they’d both agreed: if things got tough, they should go on the offensive like this to try and beat the leader commanding the rest of the golems.

“*Shield Bash!*”

“*Blade Slash!*”

Each of the siblings activated martial arts alongside their Divine Silver Barricade, giving them the power to annihilate their enemies in one fell swoop.

Celestina had formed a spiked magic barrier on her shield, and she was using it to charge ahead at the mud golems. As they were unable to retaliate, their formation collapsed. Zweit, meanwhile, had clad his sword in a magic barrier, and was using it to clear out the golems crowding in and keep them away. Each was also incorporating close-quarters fighting techniques, doubling the effectiveness of their attacks.

If they managed to defeat the leader of the golems, the training session would end. But today, that leader was an extremely large stone golem. It’d be

difficult to defeat it in a single attack, but if they could get in some good hits on its core, victory would be theirs. The siblings sought to find that victory in a short, decisive battle—a reasonable plan. However...

GROOOOAR!

THWOMP!

The stone golem commander—the leader of the formation—roared, raised its arms above its head, and slammed them down onto the ground with force. The impact created a shock wave that surged through the ground, throwing off the siblings' postures.

"Wh— Earthquake?!"

"Since when could the bastard use *that*?!"

Golem monsters that appeared in nature wouldn't usually use this sort of magic attack. After all, if they ran out of mana, they'd just turn back into a pile of stones.

At the same time, it wasn't as if they were *incapable* of using magic. In emergencies, they would sometimes use attacks like this—and then, when their opponents faltered, they'd go back to using their sheer mass for a physical attack to pulverize them. While the commander here was doing just that, the mud golems took the opportunity to collapse their bodies, creep forward like slimes, and surround the pair in a flash.

What had been intended as a decisive attack had been turned on the siblings completely. And as a result, the pair were hit with a counterattack that left them covered in mud.

"Hmm... You might've been a little too hasty in making that decision. You can't always assume your opponent's shown you their full hand, okay?"

"Regardless, that was a good battle. Each day makes me more and more excited for your futures!"

"It's *frustrating*, though! We were so close!"

"I hadn't expected it to use Earthquake there... I suppose you can never underestimate golems."

“The golems in the Far-Flung Green Depths are far worse than those ones. When *they* used Earthquake, it sent huge amounts of earth and dirt flying into the air, and just about blew up the forest around them... Ahh, that takes me back.”

It wasn't just Zweit and Celestina who were at a loss for words—it was Creston as well.

Yet in their hearts, they all wanted to say the same thing: *Seriously, how did you even survive?*

Having survived for an entire week in an environment where you could die at the drop of a hat, Zelos was clearly amazing. The three of them were shocked to hear of monsters far more powerful than any they knew about, but they were even more shocked by the human who'd managed to defeat those monsters. The more they heard about Zelos's time surviving in such a dangerous place, the more they came to see him as *way* out of their league.

After all, his two students knew: the place where they themselves had been was still only the very *entrance* to hell. The Far-Flung Green Depths seemed almost infinite, and it was home to all sorts of horrors.

Reminded of what was out there, the siblings ended their combat training for the day with a shiver of fear running down their spines.

*

Zweit had been acting a bit suspicious lately.

He would glance over at Celestina from time to time and let out a deep sigh whenever he did.

It was happening again now, the boy gazing at his sister from the shadows—and right on cue, here came the sigh.

“Today's the day. I'll finally go up to her and— No, but...”

If you didn't know what he was thinking, you'd almost guess he was in love with his younger sister. But he had no idea how he came across to others as he hid from the girl and watched, his mind going back and forth between determination and fear.

He *also* wasn't aware that the maids had seen him doing all of this.

"Was I seriously that pathetic...?"

"It's just part of your nature, isn't it? You can't help it."

"Like hell it is! I've always done my best to be a dignified man!"

"Dignified? Does that include the times you abused your authority to try and get together with Luceris?"

"*Ngh...* Okay, yeah, I was definitely in the wrong there. Looking back on it now, I don't even know why I was being such a moron... Anyway, I do feel bad about it."

"As long as you're reflecting on it. *Some* people don't listen even when others warn them, after all..."

"I knew she wasn't into me, but I guess I just felt frustrated, and— Wait. Teach?!"

Zweit wasn't sure exactly how long Zelos had been standing behind him, but he suddenly jumped from the shock.

He hadn't noticed his teacher's presence at all.

"Since when were you..."

"Oh, not long. Anyway, I think you should probably give up on...you know."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you and Celestina have different mothers, but she's still your sister. Your *blood-related* sister, to boot. Falling in love with her is a little, uh..."

"Wh-What?! No! *Hell* no! What even made you *think* that was the case?!"

It had taken him long enough, but Zweit was finally starting to realize that his suspicious actions had caused a misunderstanding.

"Hm? So you're saying you *haven't* suddenly found yourself lusting after your blood-related half sister? That's weird. All the rumors said you *have* been..."

"I have *not*! I *absolutely* have not! I just...I just wanted to apologize to her! Why'd it end up like this?!"

“Apologize to... Ah. Now I get it.”

Zelos realized now that he’d been mistaken. Zweit was one of the main culprits who’d bullied Celestina for years. And now, it seemed, he was trying to find the right opportunity to go up and apologize for everything he’d done to her in the past.

“You probably already know, Teach, but she wasn’t able to use magic until recently. The thing is, I always thought it was *her* fault. I didn’t know the magic formulas were wrong. I’m only just realizing now, but...well, my family have all been mages for generations, and I guess I just couldn’t stand the fact that there was someone incompetent in the family. I don’t think that way anymore, of course...”

“Okay. I think I have a pretty good idea now. Right.”

Zweit was proud of his family’s lineage, its history—all of it. So seeing Celestina, who had no talent at all, seemingly tarnishing that family name had been unbearable to him, and it had caused him to lash out at her badly.

In reality, however, the girl who had seemed incompetent had actually just had her talents locked away by the faulty formulas that had been used to educate her. And finding out that he’d been treating her badly all this time over something as stupid as that had left Zweit feeling incredibly guilty. It was only made worse by the fact that he had actively gone out of his way to treat her like that; upon looking back, he felt crushed by the weight of his guilt. Ever since he’d had that change of heart, he’d started searching for an opportunity to apologize and alleviate that guilt—but from the perspective of an unaware outsider, it looked like he was doing something far more questionable.

“If you care so much about your family’s reputation, then why’d you act like such a creep toward Luceris?”

“I know, I know! You don’t have to remind me—even *I* feel like something must’ve been seriously wrong with me!”

Part of it had stemmed from Zweit’s case of love syndrome—but even before that, he’d felt like he hadn’t really been himself since he’d come to the academy. Most likely, it had something to do with the “brainwashed” condition that Zelos had happened to see on Zweit’s status screen upon first appraising

him. But Zelos had completely forgotten about that little nugget of information by now.

“Whatever you might think now, you can’t change the past, you know?”

Zelos’s words brought a grimace to Zweit’s face. “You’re right. But...I don’t know. All I can say is that it felt like I had a fever that was making me go crazy or something... Looking back now, I’ve got memories of all sorts of stupid stuff I did or said. What was *wrong* with me?”

“I’m not sure that excuse is going to fly. But *if* you’re reflecting on what you did, and you actually *do* just want to apologize to Celestina, then that’s a good start. By the way, are you going to say sorry to Luceris as well?”

“Look, I *told* you already—all I want to do is apologize! Nothing else. What even made you *think* I’d be interested in my own sister in that way...?”

“There are people like that out there, you know? Some countries even let you marry their close relatives.”

“Maybe there *are* people like that, but...I’m! Not! One! Of! Them!”

Zelos had only come to check out the situation, but he’d ended up having fun toying with Zweit.

He found it entertaining to watch the boy get flustered like that.

“Anyway, why not just go up and apologize? All you need to do is say sorry, right? It’s not that complicated.”

“Sure, *saying* it is simple. But it’s not that easy to work up the courage, you know!”

“You dug that hole yourself by doing something you need to apologize for in the first place. Think of it like this, though: it’s not about whether you’re forgiven or not. You just need to take responsibility.”

“That’s exactly what I’m struggling to do. I’m just...worried about it...”

It seemed like however hard Zweit tried, he couldn’t work up the resolve. He couldn’t bring himself to take that last step, so he was just standing by and watching. His feelings were understandable...but it was time for action now.

That he was trying to make up for the past at all was a good start. Stuck as he was, though, it just made him pitiful.

“If you feel bad about what you did, then you need to hurry up and apologize. If you put it off for too long, you might end up missing your chance completely, you know? I understand how easy it is to just default to the easy option, but if you don’t put in the effort when it matters, you might end up losing any faith she still has in you.”

“But, I mean, it’s kind of...embarrassing, or humiliating, or...”

“Do you really have the right to fuss over that after how you treated her all that time? If you don’t make up for what you did wrong, you could end up spending your whole life feeling shackled by the guilt. You don’t really have the luxury of worrying about appearances at this point, do you?”

“I know. I know, but when I actually try to do it, it’s kind of... How do I put it...”

Essentially, he was acting like a coward. It was as if his usual hotheaded attitude had vanished in a puff of smoke. He was hesitating over every little thing—and frankly, it was making him come across as creepy. Seeing that sort of behavior from a young man who had everything going for him left Zelos feeling kind of irritated.

“Look. What do you actually want to do here? You say you want to apologize, but you’re just standing there like a statue. If you’re not even going to *do* anything, then why are you worrying in the first place?”

“What’s happened to you, Teach? You’re acting cool all of a sudden...”

It was like the atmosphere around Zelos had changed. Some sort of aura was emanating out of him, putting heavy pressure on Zweit.

“First, I want you to make this clear: What is it that you want to do, right here, right now? Do you want to apologize? Or give up? Which is it? Resolve is one thing, but I think what you really need right now is to be sincere.”

Zweit grimaced again. “I— I do feel like I should apologize. But—”

“What are you just standing around for, then? If you’ve already decided, then

why are you still just *thinking* about it?”

“But, I mean...I don’t know how to bring it up, so...”

“Do you really need to think that hard about it? All you need to do is say, ‘I’m sorry for everything I did.’ That’s all. If you can’t show her that you’re acting in good faith, here and now, then I feel like you’ll be stuck like this forever.”

Even then, though, Zweit found himself unable to take that last step. Zelos decided to place his hands on the boy’s shoulders and dial up the pressure another notch.

“Try to remember. Remember everything you’ve done up until now. Can the man you are today really forgive who you were in the past? Do you really think you could hold your head up high for the rest of your life without doing anything about your mistakes? Be honest with me.”

Zweit gulped. “Y-You’re right. I can’t forgive myself. What I did to Celestina was terrible. Even if she *did* say she was going to forgive me, I don’t think I’d be able to accept it.”

“Then you need to move past what you’ve done. Properly put it behind you. Keep that in mind, and it’ll help you steel your resolve. What I’m saying is, apologizing to her will be the same as settling things with who you used to be. You haven’t actually *done* anything about it yet, remember. If you can’t accept what you did, you need to start by acting in a way you *can* accept—and if that doesn’t work, then go from there. The first step to atoning for what you did is to show her how sincere you are now.”

“You’re right—I *haven’t* done anything about it yet. Okay, Teach... I’m gonna go apologize to her! In my own words!”

“That’s the spirit. Get out there and confront your past. Everything else will grow from there. And I’m not even talking about Celestina here; I’m talking about settling the score with who you used to be and deciding how you should act from now on. Even if she doesn’t forgive you, I think you should remember these feelings you have now, and keep improving yourself so that you can become who you really want to be. Think of it as a ritual! A way of being reborn as the man you were meant to be!”

Zelos was thrusting his finger at Zweit as if he were a certain black-clothed, laughing salesman.

“‘Reborn’... Yeah! I need to be reborn! I’m gonna go now, Teach! I’ve gotta get rid of this fog in my heart!”

Encouraged by Zelos, Zweit—having been a hot-blooded boy to begin with—felt a burning zeal light in his heart. He headed toward Celestina, a determined look on his face.

He set off at a run. Going as fast as he could, to say goodbye to the fool he’d been...

“He’s a simple kid, isn’t he? Is he really going to be okay as the next duke? Well, that’s just how youth is, I guess...”

Back during the global financial crisis, Zelos had spouted all sorts of even grander speeches to encourage his subordinates when they were losing their focus in crunch time. He’d come out in the midst of a scene from hell, when the team had been pulling all-nighters for a week straight, and used skillful words and rapport-building to guide them, boosting their motivation and creating a sense of team unity.

He had, of course, done so to make them finish their work faster; with deadlines looming closer and closer, they’d had no choice but to push their way through that hell. Between his well-reasoned arguments and the persuasive tactics of an expert con man, he’d eked out as much motivation from his subordinates as possible, leading them to success in project after project.

Having driven his team through that harsh period of crunch, he’d earned himself a nickname: “Mr. Sadistic.” But Zweit had no idea that that was the sort of man who’d been giving him guidance.

*

Celestina was out alone on the balcony, getting some fresh air.

A breeze was floating over from the forest, carrying the rich, earthy scent of trees. Enjoying this sort of alone time was a hobby of hers. But today, just as she was enjoying that little moment of peace, an intruder came bursting in.

That intruder was her older brother, Zweit.

“Celestina. Have you got a minute?”

“What is it, Brother? Did something happen?”

“Uh... No, this is just something I’ve resolved to do.”

“Resolved...?”

Feeling the atmosphere grow a little awkward, Celestina kept her guard high as she waited for Zweit to continue.

“Celestina, I’ve been thinking about everything since we were kids, and I...I want to say sorry! For all of it!”

“Brother?! What are you...”

Just a minute ago, she’d been alone, enjoying the breeze—but now, suddenly, her brother was bowing his head to her in apology. Celestina was bewildered.

“I’m the heir to the duchy. And everyone’s been telling me that since I was little. So I guess I just...couldn’t forgive the fact that someone who had that same blood running through their veins couldn’t use magic. But then I found out it was all the fault of the formulas, and that you didn’t do anything wrong, and I...I’ve been thinking back to all the horrible stuff I did to you over the years, and I figured I had to try and make up for all of it. Which is why... Please, let me apologize to you. Celestina, I’m so sorry! I’m not asking you to forgive me. I know how terrible the stuff I did was.”

“Brother, you don’t have to go that f—”

Celestina was fully aware of just how much Zweit took pride in his family.

And given how he’d felt such a sense of duty to that family ever since he was young, it was perhaps inevitable that he had behaved harshly toward his sister, the one and only girl in the family unable to use magic. Yet now, here he was, not only acknowledging the error of his ways, but even lowering his head before her. It gave Celestina an all-new appreciation of her brother’s sincerity.

The Solistia ducal family had protected the country for generations. They had exceptional talents for magic, and they’d used the might of that magic to save the lives of countless civilians. While there hadn’t been any conflicts big enough

to class as all-out wars, there had been frequent attacks from rampaging monsters, and the family had risked their lives on the front line time and time again, staffs in hand, to fend them off.

In the process, some of the family heads had even lost their lives in battle. So to an extent, Celestina could understand being treated poorly for having been born into that family without the ability to use magic—though at the same time, it wasn't as if she was happy about it.

While Celestina had made every effort she could to use magic, she had ultimately done so for her *own* sake. But now, as she watched her brother apologize, she could sense from him the pride and sincerity befitting a proper noble. So she decided to respond to that with sincerity of her own.

“Brother... What do you think about Master's magic?”

“Huh? Where's that coming from all of a sudden...? Honestly, though, I think it's amazing. The sheer power of it, not to mention how efficient it is... Everything about it's just on a completely different level from other magic.”

“I agree. But at the same time, it's...it's a danger to our country. If *another* country got its hands on those spells, with the way they provide such might with such little mana... I hate to think of how much bloodshed would ensue.”

“Yeah... It'd be a horrible war. It's nothing like the magic we know. It's just so overwhelmingly strong...”

“Master actually has wide-area annihilation magic too.”

“I...I can barely believe it. I've heard of it as an *idea*, but there's never been a mage who's actually managed to put it into practice. I thought it'd just be something like regular area magic that's been improved a bit.”

Also known as “tactical magic,” wide-area annihilation magic was something that each of the major factions were trying to develop. If word got out that it had already been completed and was in the hands of a single individual, it'd be a major problem. Zelos was almost like a nuclear warhead that had grown arms and legs and started to walk around.

“Master was saying something to me: ‘If you obsess over the power of your magic too much, you run the risk of making some truly evil spells.’ And as his

apprentice, that's not what I want to do. I want to create the kind of magic that will make people *happy*."

"The risks of tactical magic, huh...? Certainly, if it's as strong as the theories say it could be, it might just be the most dangerous stuff imaginable."

"I feel like what Master wants from us as his disciples might be to create uses for magic that help the lives of countless people. Not magic for just *destroying*... You agree, don't you?"

"I can't. I... I was born the heir of a family that protects the country. It's my *duty* to protect the people. But if there's another path out there, then you can feel free to take it. I'll fulfill my duty as the next duke."

"Brother..."

"Teach's magic is amazing. I know. But if it's used wrong, it can only end in disaster. With great power comes great responsibility; that's something I learned when I came back here. But even then, I'll do whatever it takes to protect the people. I'm ready to sacrifice everything I have to fulfill my duty as a noble."

The two siblings were headed down different paths. Celestina was aiming to give the people happier, better lives, while Zweit was ready to dye his hands with blood if that was what it took to protect the people and their belongings.

Both of those were essential things to do, yet they were separate paths that wouldn't intersect. Each of the two was set on going in opposite directions.

"Celestina... Have you actually *seen* Teach's wide-area annihilation spells?"

"I saw the formula for one of them. And I felt...an incredible flow of mana from it. The formula itself was so advanced I couldn't understand it, but I could tell—it's too dangerous to exist."

"That's probably *why* he showed you. He might've wanted to make you choose a different path."

"Brother... Are you really okay with going down a path of endless violence?"

"Well, it's my duty. I was raised on tax money from the common people; I can't just run away and leave them when they helped raise me like that. I'll do

what I have to. Even if I might die in the process.”

Zweit was already prepared for that possibility. And hearing him say it, Celestina began to realize that she’d had a misconception about her brother. Zweit had been given a special education, so as rough as he might have come across most of the time, he *had* been well raised; unlike other young men his age, he’d been taught the duties of a noble, understood them, and kept them firmly in his heart.

That was a large part of why he’d felt so indignant toward Celestina, who was a noble like him and yet had been unable to use magic to protect the people of the country. She, too, had been raised on the common people’s money, and she hadn’t been unable to do anything for them whatsoever.

It had been a misguided hate, but it was one that had stemmed from Zweit’s wish to protect the people, as well as his resolve to follow the same path as his grandfather.

“You’ll still be using your magic to help the people, though, won’t you?”

“Yeah. The only difference is whether we’re helping them by making their lives better, or by protecting their lives and possessions. I’m sorry, Celestina...this is the only path I can take.”

“It’s fine. Just seeing how serious you are is enough for me. I...I forgive you, Brother.”

“H-Huh?”

Zweit had given voice to his innermost feelings—his resolve as a noble. And just hearing that had been enough for Celestina to forgive him.

Right from a young age, Zweit had understood the burden of being expected to protect the people’s lives, and he’d carried that burden with him.

Celestina, meanwhile, had just kept her gloomy feelings locked up inside. It had looked as though she was working hard, but she was realizing now that she had actually just been running away from her position.

“We can’t stay like this forever. Once I graduate from the academy, I’ll probably end up joining the military. And if I do, I’ll have to follow the state’s

orders.”

“I-I...”

“How about you take a look and try to find something that only *you* can do? You don’t need to rush. I mean, you know there’s no way Grandfather’s going to push you into a political marriage or something.”

“Is it really okay for me to be the only one with that freedom? It’s not just you; I’m sure Croesus will eventually have to—”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll be prepared for it as well. As much as he pisses me off.”

Zweit let out a proper laugh. Not the laugh of the young man who had just been filled with resolve for his country, but the honest laugh of any other boy his age. After all, today was a good day: he and his sister had managed to put their bad blood behind them.

Still, Celestina thought she could sense a hint of something terribly sad in her brother’s expression.

For the first time, she had come to realize just how heavy a burden Zweit would have to carry throughout his life. He was walking down the only path he could.

Chapter 7: The Old Guy Checks Out His New Home's Construction Site

That same day, Zelos went to the official ducal mansion to meet with Delthasis, the current duke.

It didn't take long for the man's two wives to start sending him piercing glares. But while it bothered him a little, he decided to try and ignore it for now.

Zelos was fully aware that one careless phrase could easily spark the fires of conflict; that was precisely what made dealing with the rich and powerful such a bother. Nothing good would come of sticking his head into that, he knew.

Right now, Zelos was making full use of his old life's experience, wearing the same polite mask he'd used in his business dealings.

"Please, do tell us your name."

"My name? I'm Zelos Merlin. Just a humble mage."

One wife let out a haughty laugh. "It seems you understand your place. Nevertheless, that is a rather...*questionable* choice of attire, is it not?"

"It's just how I prefer to dress."

For whatever reason, Delthasis's two wives seemed to be sizing him up. He wanted to cry out for help, but the duke was immersed in rubbing his brow, looking as if he was trying to deal with a headache.

"By the way, Your Grace, may I ask why you've called me here today?"

"You may. Do you remember our little discussion about me granting you some land?"

"Ah—I've actually been wondering when that would come up again. I was starting to think I'd have to live out of an inn."

"That almost sounds like something out of that book that's been popular in town lately: *The Borrower*— Ah. I probably shouldn't say the rest."

“A...book? Popular in town? How’s *that* story gotten... Don’t tell me, is it a bestseller or something? Well, leaving that aside, am I correct to think that you’ll be giving me the rights to some land?”

“You’re quick on the uptake. Good. I’m just about to head into town with my wives, so I want to get things settled quickly.”

While Zelos had heard that Delthasis’s two wives didn’t get along with each other well, it didn’t seem that way to him at all.

If anything, the two of them looked like old friends, happily chatting to each other about where they were going.

“You really *are* quite a capable man, it seems...”

“I’d prefer to set that topic aside. Let’s continue our discussion. Here’s your title for the land; just write your name down here and it’ll formally be yours. Any questions?”

“This was for...a piece of land behind the church, was it? In the old part of town.”

“It might be a bit of a rough area, yes. But I imagine a man of your talents could turn the tables on just about any attacker, hmm?”

“I could. The only difficult part would be holding back enough to not kill them.” Zelos began to flick through the documents Delthasis had given him. “Ooh...and it seems like the house is already being built, is it?”

The papers included blueprints for the new building. Zelos took a closer look to get an idea of how his new home was going to be laid out.

“I...do have a bit of a question, if that’s okay?”

“What is it?”

“It says here that the house will be ready for me in two weeks from now. But is it really possible to build a house that quickly? I would’ve thought it would take much longer than that...”

“The dwarven carpenters we hired are a vigorous lot. They’re building at *terrifying* speed. I specifically left the project to a group of highly skilled crafters, but they’re working even faster than I’d expected. If anything, the construction

should be done *ahead* of schedule.”

“I know construction projects can fall *behind* schedule sometimes, but...being *ahead* of schedule? I didn’t even know that was a possibility. Just what *is* this group of dwarves...?”

“They’re known as Hamber Construction. One of our country’s leading companies specializing in construction.”

As Delthesis described them, they were the textbook definition of true artisans, and had quite the reputation for taking on any job as long as it would allow them to make something. They weren’t the type to compromise at all; apparently, if one of them made even the slightest mistake, they’d soon be hit by a fist strong enough to fell even great trees, no questions asked. They were merciless with their customers too—if you asked them for a change in design after the fact, they’d knock you down, straddle your body, and start beating you up.

“I like the sound of that. I can’t stand the sort of people who come in halfway through a project, see their house being built exactly to plan, say, ‘Oh, I don’t like it,’ or something, and suddenly ask the builders to change the whole layout.”

“Yes—they’re a crafter’s nightmare, those sorts. But any client who tries that with the dwarves will be put through hell.”

“Do they only work on things that interest them, then? It sounds like they have a pretty insane amount of freedom, for crafters...”

“Perhaps, but their skills are undeniable. And you can even count on them to be finished by the deadline.”

“Not just ‘by the deadline’; you were saying they might even be finished *earlier* than that, weren’t you? Anyway, I’m getting the idea that they’re reliable craftsmen.”

Zelos got a feeling that there might be some other kind of problem with the dwarves as well...but he decided not to pry any further.

Sometimes, it was wise to just wait and see.

“All that said, I’d appreciate if you could inspect the site while you still can and give your opinion. If we leave it all up to them, they’re liable to change the design however they see fit, the wishes of the man who’ll actually live there be damned.”

“I don’t think the house itself should be a problem, at least. Looking at the blueprints here, anything they *did* change would’ve only been minor. I can see a bath, a toilet, and...probably more rooms than I’ll need, but I don’t think that’s really an issue.”

“Is that so?”

“Ideally I’d like to have a basement instead of a ground-level storage room, but I suppose that might be a bit much to ask for, budgetwise...”

“The wyvern stones you gave us are more than enough to pay for everything. There’s no need for you to hold back. But if you want a basement, I’d like you to ask the builders yourself.”

Zelos paused for a moment. “Is there...a problem with that?”

“Well, If *I’m* the one who tells them, they might hit me.”

“So you’re telling *me* to go and get hit?! Just how violent *are* these dwarves...?”

It was becoming increasingly clear to Zelos that this wasn’t your average group of crafters. He was getting an image of them as the sort to use their jobs as an excuse to just do whatever they wanted, committing crimes for fun along the way. Honestly, he wasn’t excited about the prospect of going to meet them.

“It’s going to be *your* house, isn’t it? Wouldn’t it be strange for *me* to be the one giving the opinions?”

“You may be right, but I’d rather avoid getting involved with them, if they’re as strange as you say.”

“I understand how you feel. But let me tell you: if you *don’t* go to make an inspection, they’ll probably come after you themselves to beat you up. The whole lot of them.”

“Are they seriously *that* violent? And they call themselves crafters?!”

Realizing just how troublesome a group he was about to get involved with, Zelos sighed and moved to leave the room.

It seemed like he'd have to go and inspect the construction site, whether he wanted to or not. But just as he was about to leave, the two duchesses called out to him.

"So, I heard you were single. Do you not intend on getting married?"

"I'd *like* to start a family. But for now, I've got my hands full with my own life. I'll give it some more thought once I've managed to settle in a bit."

"What would you think about taking our family's little failure as your own, then? I struggle to think of her as a real part of our family anyway..."

"'Failure'? Are you talking about Celestina? I'm...just a commoner, you know?"

"Perhaps, but a useless, incompetent girl like her isn't even fit for a political marriage. And I'd rather not keep her around forever."

The two duchesses still thought of Celestina as a good-for-nothing who couldn't use any magic. But in reality, she had already become good enough to be classed as an intermediate-level mage.

Unaware of that fact, the two women seemed focused on trying to get rid of what they considered an eyesore.

"I think I'll pass. I'd rather not be killed by Mr. Creston, after all... Anyway, Your Grace, I don't want to interrupt your day off with your wives, so I'll show myself out now. I hope you have a good day."

Having managed to ward off the women's loaded words without committing a faux pas, Zelos gave a polite nod of his head before retreating from this social battlefield.

He walked out with a calm, controlled gait—but internally, he was panicked by the duchesses' gaze, desperate to avoid getting caught up with nobles any more than he already was.

"He did well to sidestep that, didn't he?"

"Yes. I heard that he had gone so far as to request a plot of land, so I thought

he would have some sort of lofty ambitions. But perhaps not...”

“He certainly doesn’t seem to have great ambitions. Yet I struggle to see him as trustworthy all the same.”

“What would our father-in-law even think if we brought such a suspicious mage into the family...?”

The two of them were unaware of Zelos’s abilities. And because of that, they were coming up with all sorts of uninformed guesses, and asking Delthasis, their husband, for confirmation. But Delthasis had no intention of answering.

After all, he was hesitant to get on the bad side of a Great Sage.

“Never mind him. More importantly, are the two of you ready to go out?”

“Yes—let’s take it slow and enjoy ourselves today, shall we?”

“I agree. Where are you going to take us today? Oh, I cannot wait to find out...”

Delthasis lived by the credo of speaking like a lawyer, having the heart of a con man, and walking with the swagger of a lady-killer. His relations with countless women weren’t just for show. A cool charm emanated from his every word; he might have had a bad habit of playing with fire, but he was a master at it. He was a man among men, and he never forgot to take proper care of his women.

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Zelos was walking through the city of Santor. He was headed to a plot of land behind the church—to the construction site that would soon be his own home, on his own land.

Just over two weeks had passed since he had helped harvest the mandrakes at the church, and there hadn’t been any construction work going on back then.

But when he arrived there now, he saw what was indeed his plot of land—and a great throng of dwarves, all sweating profusely as they built what would become his home.

“Boss! Where should I fit this post?”

“Hah? It’s numbered, ain’t it? Where are you even looking?!”

“Nah, the number’s gone. Maybe someone spilled some water on it or something? A bunch of them are like this now.”

“Who the *hell* thought it’d be a good idea to eat around the building materials? Bet they spilled some tea on it!”

“It was him!”

“Oy! Don’t dob me in like that, you knobhead!”

It looked like the dwarves were in the middle of something. Unsure of what to say, Zelos just stood there, dumbfounded.

“Obar... So it was you, eh? I hope you’re ready for the consequences!”

“W-Wait! Dorill did it as well! If you’re going to get angry, get angry at him t
—”

“You bastard! Going to sell *me* out too, are you?”

“Shut your mouth! If *I’m* getting screwed, I ain’t letting *you* get away that easy!”

“Grit your teeth, you two. Here’s your punishment!”

Zelos heard an awfully vivid sound, followed by the groans of two dwarves.

The pair of them were left writhing on the floor in pain.

“How long are you going to lie there for? Get back to work!”

The two victims responded with a tone of resignation: “Right...”

Dwarves were sturdy. Both of them had taken a punch that clearly would’ve been enough to knock down a heavyweight boxer—but just moments later, they’d stood back up as if it had been no big deal. Clearly their bodies were incredibly tough. It was also Zelos’s first time seeing nonhumans. And now, as he stood there with a vacant look on his face, he was finally noticed by the dwarf who seemed to be the boss here.

“Hey, you. What’re you here for?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry for the late introduction. I’m Zelos, the person who’s going to

be living here.”

“You? This building is something the *duke* asked us to do, though...”

“It’s a long story, but yes, it’s for me. By the way, who’s the one in charge of this site? For...Hamber Construction, I think it was?”

“Yeah, that’d be me. I’m Nagri. The boss of us builders here.”

“Nagri, is it? Pleasure to meet you.”

“Not that I mind, but what do you think of the house we designed for you?”

“It looks nice. I don’t have any issues with the layout, or the balance of the rooms, or anything like that. But...”

“What? You got a problem with something?”

“No, it’s...more of a personal thing, I suppose. But I *am* a mage, you see. So I was thinking it’d be nice if I could have more of an *underground* storage room, like a basement or something. Though I understand it might be a bit late for that, if you’ve already laid the foundations.”

For a moment, Nagri’s eyes took on a stern look.

“*Hmmmm*? So you want your storage *underground*, eh? Is *that* it?”

“It’s just a minor preference, more than anything, so I won’t *force* you to change things. It looks like you’ve already finished with the foundation, after all.”

The dwarf’s expression relaxed. “Huh. Didn’t think of that! It’s a request from the duke, so we were sure he was just going to have one of his mistresses move in there. But...a basement, eh? Didn’t even cross our minds.”

“How many mistresses does he even have?”

“Who knows? I see him with one every now and then, but it’s a different lady every time. Always widows or women who look like they’re in some pickle or another. Couldn’t give you an exact number, though.”

Delthasis seemed to end up in relationships with a lot of women who were in difficult circumstances.

He’d become lovers with a woman ensnared by some sort of shady

organization, do absolutely everything within his power to save her, and ultimately end up utterly destroying those organizations in the process. Those were the sorts of tales he was leaving behind.

However, he didn't use his authority as duke for any of that. All of it was done using the connections he'd built through his side business as a trader.

It had helped him to make a name for himself as one of the country's leading traders. And whenever he *did* destroy a shady organization, he'd bring it under his own umbrella, growing his influence further. For now, at least, it seemed that he had them all working hard at respectable trading work.

"He's earned himself a nickname: 'the Silent Duke.' He certainly *looks* like a real gentleman, but I hear he's a pretty dangerous man, you know?"

"He's a hard man, that much is for sure. Lord knows what drives him so much..."

"I know he's said something like 'he lives to find women in dark places and pull them into the light.' He's even put out a book! It's called *The True Gentleman: Life's Meaning Lies in Happy Women*. It's all in there."

"What the hell is the duke *doing* with himself?! And...wait, is he getting royalties from that? And you *read* it?!"

"Hey, it was a bestseller! It's every man's bible."

"Seriously?! *Damn*, the guy's multitalented..."

It was just about the last thing Zelos had expected from a duke.

"Well, never mind the duke. Let's get back to the basement. Wonder if that Gaia Control spell'd be able to do something about it? We stocked up on it to add it to our arsenal, but..."

"It probably can. You'd need some pretty good control over it, though."

"Oh. That so?" Nagri paused for a moment. And then: "Wait. How do *you* know about that?"

"Well, I *am* a mage. Actually, would you like me to do it myself? I'm pretty good at that sort of thing. You could say it's my specialty."

“Eh, I don’t know about leaving it to an amateur... But you’ve got a point. We’re not too good at using magic, and we only started using it just recently...”

As a general rule, dwarves tended to shy away from using magic. They actually had a lot of mana, and they could become mages if they put in the effort—but for whatever reason, feverishly devoting themselves to some sort of trade came more naturally to them. Still, that was precisely why Gaia Control offered them so much, since it was useful in things like farmwork and construction.

Being particularly well suited to things like basic construction tasks and forest development, Gaia Control had excellent compatibility with the dwarves, so all of them had bought it from Solistia Trading. The problem was that they weren’t yet capable of controlling it with much finesse—though if they continued to use it, they’d eventually learn the Mana Control skill.

For now, though, none of them were capable of exhibiting such delicate control over the spell.

“Well, it’s *your* house, so I guess I don’t mind if you end up breaking it a bit. We’ll charge the duke extra if you do, though.”

“You’re quite the scoundrels, aren’t you? The problem is...I’ll have to change the basic shape a bit to make the structure work. Is that all right?”

“Yeah. We can tell you what to do. Follow me.”

Nagri led Zelos to the center of the house’s frame and showed him around.

There was a somewhat open area there—probably a combined kitchen and living room area. A number of long pieces of lumber had been laid to support the floor, but the floor itself hadn’t been laid yet, so it didn’t seem like things would be too difficult.

“You’ll have to dig between here and that post over there. What are you going to do to strengthen it, though? If you just use a layer of earth, your whole house’ll end up collapsing. And there’s only so much you’ll even be able to do to strengthen it.”

“As I dig down with Gaia Control, I’m also going to be using Rock Forming to reinforce everything with bedrock, including the foundations.”

“‘Rock Forming’? Since when has there been a spell like that? That’s the first time I’ve heard of it.”

“It just compacts some dirt to harden it and turn it into rocks. That’s all. It’s not perfected yet; there are some problems that should probably be fixed before it hits the market.”

Rock Forming had primarily been created for making things like flower beds. But depending on what you did with it, it seemed like it could be used to help quickly build forts as well, so Zelos didn’t want to start selling it recklessly. If people *did* start using the spell for that sort of purpose, it’d pose a major shake-up to the military balance of the entire world. After all, if a bit of land could be empty one day and then suddenly home to an enemy nation’s fort the next, it’d wreak havoc on military strategy. It’d be like the legend of how Sunomata Castle was built in a single night.

Regular civilians could potentially be pressed into military service as combat engineers, the state forcing them to help build military sites. If they won, they’d probably receive a reward, and all would be well. But if they lost, they’d probably die. It wasn’t just knights that fought in wars; there were mages and mercenaries as well, but the largest group by far was the civilian conscripts. There were others too—like criminals who agreed to serve as soldiers in exchange for a reduced sentence—though most of those were sent to the front line.

All of it had Zelos hesitating to spread his magic without caution.

“I’ll dig it out bit by bit. Should I start with the stairs?”

“Sounds about right. First, though, maybe you should turn the foundations into rock, and just leave what you’re going to dig through. What do you think?”

“Good idea. Well, then... *Rock Forming!*”

Zelos’s spell gathered up soil from around the area and transformed it into bedrock about three meters thick around the foundations.

Upon seeing it, Nagri couldn’t help but voice his admiration.

“Looks like quite the useful spell. Heck, I want it for myself!”

“I still have some things I want to adjust first, and the mana consumption’s a little higher than I’d like, so...”

“You saying it wasn’t made for the general public? Sounds like you’re trying out a bunch of stuff... Wait, *you’re* the one that made it?!”

“Keep it a secret, please. The thing is, this spell could be dangerous depending on how you use it. Everything needs to have some unspoken rules, right?”

“You ain’t wrong.”

It was human nature to find all sorts of applications for convenient magic. And if that went too far, any unspoken agreement would collapse.

“Should I do it like I’m creating stairs slanting down from here?”

“Yeah. You want the entrance to be wide?”

“Hmm, let’s see. It *is* going to be a storage room, after all, so...I suppose it’s not a problem if the entrance is a little narrow.”

“Well, you’re the one living in it, so I won’t complain, but...”

“In that case—*Gaia Control*.”

Zelos started to dig down, manipulating the remaining earth into an arch. Once he’d gotten about five meters underground, he used Rock Forming to harden the earth, then dug a tunnel from there.

As he dug the tunnel, he hardened that as well—and bit by bit, his basement began to take shape.

“Hey, you...”

“Hmm?”

“You want to come work with us? If you wanted to put those skills of yours to use in the building industry, we’d love to have you. How about it?”

“Huh?!”

He’d been scouted for a job.

“Sorry, but I’m a researcher through and through. I just want to live a quiet life and tend to some fields.”

“Come on—a bit of work wouldn’t hurt! Even if you just want to be a temp worker! You’re good enough to make any dwarf fall for you! Please, we’d love to have you help us out!”

“I’m really not suited for manual labor, and for now, my first priority is to get set up in a place to live...”

“Wouldn’t you usually put your work first? Even if you’ve got a house, how do you plan on getting by without any money?”

It was a valid point. While Zelos was working as a private tutor for now, he wasn’t actually sure how much he was getting paid. In terms of his future, it probably *would* be in his best interests to take on some temporary work.

But Zelos was happy as long as he had enough money to scrape by—and now that he knew he’d be getting royalties from selling his magic, he wasn’t particularly worried about his income.

There were also problems like taxes...but that was something he decided to shove away into the corner of his mind for now.

“Hmm...maybe if you’re okay with just having me when I’m free? As a day laborer of sorts, if that’d be all right with you.”

“Aha! Glad I managed to get through to you.”

“I *am* going to be unemployed a few weeks from now, after all. I suppose it’d be nice to have a bit more income. I’ll try to help you out just when the timing works for me.”

“Hm? Are you really looking to retire? You’re still so young!”

“I might look young to you, but I don’t think I’ll be able to do physical labor in another ten or so years. Humans get old rather quickly, you know.”

“Dwarves aren’t that different, but I guess we still got plenty of strength even when we’re old...”

“You live longer than humans, don’t you? Unlike you, we’re not spiritkin, so we can’t live for that long.”

A dwarf’s average life span was around two hundred years, while for elves it was around three hundred. There were also high elves and high dwarves, who

were able to easily live for twice that long.

Incidentally, the longest-lived species was dragons. Apparently they could live for three thousand years, at the very least.

“Do you *want* to live longer?”

“Well, a human body can only live for about a hundred years. So I *am* jealous of the longer-lived races.”

“Is that’s how it is? If you live too long, the humans you know’ll start to die off one by one! It’s a sad thing. All the people I knew back when I was a lad are old geezers now.”

“I understand what you’re saying. Both of my parents died at a young age; I know just how lonely it can feel to stand in an old house alone. I did end up getting used to it, though.”

“Then you get what I’m saying, yeah? About how it feels to be left behind, and have to live on alone.”

“I understand that too. But even then, when I’m thinking back on the past, and their names come up...it makes me happy. This is all just the opinion of someone who’s going to die earlier than you dwarves, mind you. And it’s my own *personal* opinion, at that...but yes, that’s the case for me, at least. Though it’s only natural to not want to be left behind.”

“Makes sense. Feels like I’ve learned something.”

As the two talked, the basement continued to come together.

Containing three rooms, it was turning into a pretty impressive structure.

“Gone with arches for both the rooms and the ceiling, have you? Looks like you know a little bit about building.”

“Well, yes; this should be good for dispersing the weight that’ll be placed on it from above. That’s just the basics, though, right?”

“Pretty much. Bridges and castles use arches all the time.”

“I should probably open an air vent as well. The house is going to be built on top anyway, so it’s not like you’ll actually *see* it from outside. And I don’t think it

should be a problem to open up a bit of a hole in the foundations.”

“The more you talk, the more I want you to join us. We’d get some good work done together.”

“Just in case, I suppose I’ll turn the foundations around the underground section into rock. You never know what could happen, so it wouldn’t hurt to make them nice and sturdy.”

After opening up an air vent, Zelos turned the foundations around the underground section into rock, turning almost the whole thing into a big rock slab. The foundations of the house were integrated into one component now, making it sturdy enough that it’d take something truly out of the ordinary to knock it down.

“How are you going to light up the basement? Magic tools? The magic stones’ll set you back a fair bit if you do...”

“I can just go out and hunt for them myself, so it shouldn’t be a problem. I can get as many magic stones as I’d like.”

Nagri paused, thinking. “So you’re good in a fight too, eh? You’re saying some pretty wild things like they’re nothing. Must be talented, I bet.”

“Who can say for sure? I’m not the type to pay too much attention to what others say about me.”

“Spoken like a mage. Nothing in your heads but research, huh?”

The work on building the basement had gone surprisingly quickly. And when the two of them came back outside, the other dwarves were continuing their own construction work without feeling anything out of the ordinary. Zelos had used compacted dirt to reinforce the ground and foundations around the basement, so the soil level in the area should’ve become a little bit lower—but aboveground, nothing seemed too out of the ordinary.

“Should I level out the soil as well? I don’t want everything getting flooded if it rains.”

“By the way, I’ve been wanting to ask—why do you dress so shady? You look *incredibly* suspicious.”

“It’s just what I like. Looking suspicious is the point. Heh heh heh...”

“Someone’s going to end up reporting you just based on your looks someday, you know? What’re you going to do about that?”

“If they do, I should be able to wrangle some consolation money out of it for a mistaken arrest. So bring it on, I say!”

“You *want* that to happen?! That’s a real personality you got there!”

It seemed like Zelos was keen on the idea of earning easy money—just as you’d expect from a former office worker. With those days behind him, he was determined to try and make a quick profit from any opportunity that came his way. But even as he talked about his questionable moneymaking plans, he worked to level the ground, expertly flattening out any inclines or uneven spots on his plot of land. The sight left the other dwarves lost for words, flabbergasted as they watched his construction skills.

“Damn, Boss, he’s good! How about we get him to come work for us?”

“He’s already agreed to join us as a temp worker. Only when it suits him, though.”

“Just what we’d expect, Boss! You got a good eye!”

“We’ll be able to work even faster now! Preparing the land’s always the biggest pain of any job...”

“Road building too. You gotta deal with such big areas; it kills you.”

“Less moving your mouths, more moving your hands! The deadline’s coming up!”

The rest of the workers responded in unison: “Riiight!”

Ultimately, Zelos had received a warm welcome from the builders.

This world hadn’t had a convenient spell like Gaia Control until just recently, so all of the work had been done by manual labor. That included leveling the land—which required you to take measurements over and over, making minor adjustments after each measurement until you finally managed to get it flat.

The same went for building highways. It was a real struggle to get things flat

enough to make sure that rainwater wouldn't pool and form a pond in the middle of the road somewhere.

If water levels rose, merchants' carriages would get stuck, which would in turn hurt the economy. That meant that construction had to be thorough, which in turn required you to check the land properly.

When it got to the rainy season, water on the roads could even leave carriages stuck for days on end, opening them to attack from bandits or other criminals. The dwarves knew very well just how annoying it was to have to do all the work to prevent that, so when the duke had told them about the existence of the Gaia Control construction spell, they'd decided to try and get their hands on it right away. The very first dwarves who'd acquired the spell had been struck with wonder at its convenience, and they'd been quick to get the hang of using it. Though they still weren't at the level of being able to use it for more delicate tasks.

Working on hilly or uneven mountain roads, for example, would usually require a great many workers; the labor expenses alone were nothing to sniff at. And especially when it was a direct request from the duke, builders wanted to avoid unnecessary costs—so in order to finish the job within budget, they'd need to abandon other jobs, and would often struggle to finish all of the work before the deadline. But not only did Gaia Control make it possible to finish that work before the deadline more reliably, it also made it possible to get the work done efficiently with just limited personnel, as well as dramatically improve the efficiency of tasks like leveling the land.

Essentially, it enabled speed about on par with real-world heavy construction equipment. But it also avoided the need to actually bring that equipment to the site, so it was easy to clean up and evacuate the site after the end of construction as well. Furthermore, it made it possible to work on multiple sites at once—which, in turn, meant more income for the builders. And if they ended up adding the Rock Forming spell to their arsenal too, they'd become able to form gutters along highways that were at risk of flooding from rainwater, creating minor slopes to make the water flow down to somewhere else.

If you could dig gutters without manual labor, those sorts of jobs would become far quicker. And if you used mana potions, the work would be even

faster and more efficient—far beyond anything the world had seen before. As a result, the builders would be able to carry out all sorts of jobs, and companies would be able to get by with fewer laborers.

In short, it seemed like Zelos had just sparked an industrial revolution in the world's construction industry—all without even intending to. Though in a sense, it was Solistia Trading that was completely in charge of selling the magic; Zelos played only an indirect role...

"If you keep using this magic, you'll get better at it in no time. You really don't have to be surprised by what I'm doing here..."

"Your magic has a wider range of effects than ours. Not to mention, your work's precise, and you get it done incredibly fast. I'm jealous, to be honest."

"Is that really true? You know, I was always intending to use the space around the house as a field, so I just leveled the ground so I'd have better drainage. That's all."

"We'd struggle to do that, though. Us dwarves don't usually use magic; we're more of the manual labor type. It'll take us some time to get good with it."

Dwarves had a good affinity for earth magic, but they'd never had any use for it outside of combat.

As a result, the only dwarves who learned magic were those who learned it for fighting; the rest all put their effort into industries and the like, so it was rare for them to use mana. About the only exceptions would be something like using body-strengthening magic to help carry a particularly heavy object.

"Nagri! Give me a hand with that post over there!"

"Sure! This one, right? Just give me a sec."

A dwarf sitting on a horizontal post that was part of the frame of the house's second floor had called out to Nagri. Seeing as he'd called so casually, he was probably in a higher-up position at the site himself.

Nagri picked up the nearby post—and then, a dangerous light shone in his eyes.

"Rot in hell, Yumboh!"

“Waaaagh!”

Nagri had used body-strengthening magic, then thrown the post at the dwarf named Yumboh with the strength and technique of a professional javelin thrower. But Yumboh swayed back to dodge the post, and caught it as it flew just above him.

However, the throw had too much momentum—and so it simply kept going, taking Yumboh with it. He and the post ended up dangling from the frame of the building.

Nagri clicked his tongue. “Damn. Bastard dodged it.”

“N-Nagri? Were you just trying to...kill him?”

“He stole my spicy fried boromoro ball earlier! I was saving it for last! I was looking *forward* to eating that, damn it!”

It had been a crime of impulse, then. Attempted murder over a bit of stolen food.

“It was a limited edition! They only sell it once a year! I lined up to get it, and it was the last one they had! So of *course* I’d want to kill him! You’d be the same, right?”

Zelos, similarly, had been looking forward to drinking some high-quality ginjo sake, only to miss out when the four goddesses took him to this new world.

So he was quite familiar with the resentment that Nagri was feeling.

“And you know what? He just gulped it down as a snack to go with his alcohol. Right in front of my eyes!”

“Jeez. Okay, that *does* sound pretty terrible...”

If Yumboh had just eaten the food in secret, it would’ve been one thing. But seeing that he ate it right in front of the person he stole it from, it was only natural that the victim—Nagri—would be even angrier. Could you *really* blame him for flying into a murderous rage?

Nagri stood now, continuing to tremble with rage—as the incredibly indignant dwarf in question came storming up to him.

“Nagri! What the hell was that for?!”

“Huh?! You’re the one that started it! You didn’t even apologize, and just went about your day looking pleased with yourself; it was pissing me off! Drop dead, you piece of shit!”

“It was just a bit of bird meat! Jeez, you’re petty. *You* should drop dead, you moron!”

“‘Just a bit of bird meat’?! Now that you’ve eaten it, I’ll have to wait a whole *year* to get one again! And you’re acting like that’s nothing... Looks like you *want* me to kill you, huh?! ”

“It’s still just meat! You’re always eating just about the same thing anyway!”

“Shut up, you knucklehead! It’s *clearly* different! Don’t you have taste buds?! Besides, it’s *your* fault for stealing my food without asking! Now, let’s have you die as an apology!”

“Is this seriously something to try and *kill* me over?!”

“Yeah. That’s how bad it is. Even my heart of steel has its limits.”

The boromoro was an incredibly cautious migratory bird. Not the kind of ingredient that was easy to get. Many hunters tried their hands at hunting them, but the large majority failed, making their meat a rare delicacy.

And seeing that meat get eaten right in front of his face had been enough to drive Nagri into a fit of rage.

“How about *you* die instead, Nagri?!”

“Come get me, then! I’ll make you regret it!”

And so began a grand brawl between the two dwarves. The rest of the dwarves, meanwhile, ignored them and continued their work. Zelos was starting to get the idea that this sort of thing was routine here.

“Can I go home now?”

Left alone all of a sudden, Zelos was at a loss.

Some time later, he heard stories that the pair’s brawl had lasted until dawn. Dwarvish endurance really was something to behold.

Chapter 8: The Old Guy Goes Back to Being Unemployed

Zelos was sitting at his desk, creating something.

Spread out across the desk was a detailed, intricate sigil, with a bundle of magic formulas off to the side. And on top of the sigil was a small lump of metal, about the size of a palm.

“That should be about it for the preparations. Now, let’s get started...”

Zelos muttered to himself—something that had become a bit of a habit over his many years as a bachelor—and got to work, all alone in his room. As he placed his hand on the sigil and poured mana into it, the sigil began to shine with a faint light, activating to serve its purpose. Beams of light came together to form a substrate. Then the lump of metal on top of the sigil began to float in midair, where one of Zelos’s skills allowed him to process information from his eyes and use it to help manipulate the material in front of him as he desired. The metal started to bend into the shapes Zelos had in mind.

What Zelos was performing here was the ultimate alchemical technique: transmutation. With transmutation, a mage could shape metals or other materials into whatever form they wanted, and all without the need for any equipment. But while it worked similarly to techniques for the formation of sigils, you wouldn’t be able to use it without a good understanding of the process. It was an advanced technique—and a particularly difficult one at that. It was one of the highest pinnacles of magic, requiring the mage to make full use of just about all of their abilities, including control over the spell itself; control over their mana; and smelting knowledge, which itself encompassed knowledge of metal refining processes, chemicals, and so on.

Zelos’s fingertips danced with grace, as if he were playing a piano, across a keyboard he’d projected in midair before the sigil. And as those fingertips typed out commands, the metal on the sigil changed shape, bit by bit.

He was making two rings and a bracelet. The main metal he was using was mithril, which had relatively good mana affinity as far as metals went. But he was also incorporating manalite ore, which had very similar properties, to form an alloy and make up for any lack of strength, creating a magic conduit that would take quite a lot to break.

While mithril certainly had good mana affinity, it was somewhat weak as a metal, so Zelos was doing this to reinforce its strength. Mages commonly used staffs as conduits to help them accumulate their own mana, but you didn't actually have to use a wooden staff specifically; anything would do, as long as it had good mana compatibility.

The reason mages defaulted to staffs was because wood was effective at storing mana inside it. But both the staff's strength and its ability to accumulate mana could differ depending on the specific kind of wood used. What was more, the tree's age could have a significant effect on magical stability, requiring a considerable wait before you could use a tree's wood for magical purposes.

Even if two mages were just as talented as each other, one could have less stable magic depending on their disposition. And while staffs or other conduits could help deal with that, that meant that differences in the *quality* of those conduits could lead to a discrepancy between the power levels of otherwise equal mages—and in turn, a gap in where those mages stood in the hierarchy. For example, even at the Istol Academy of Magic—considered the peak of magical academia—students from noble families used particularly high-quality staffs. And the result was that even if students from commoner families were just as talented, they would lose out in power to the noble students and their high-quality staffs, which meant that those nobles were treated as if they were more talented.



This meant that regular mages, who could only get their hands on cheap staffs, usually wound up having their value judged by something *completely* unrelated to their actual capabilities as mages. The relative strength of each mage's staff caused an unfair gap to open up between them—and that gap then led to discrimination.

Magic conduits made from metal, however, were always stable, and it wasn't as if their power was much weaker compared to staffs made from wood. Their mana was stable as well; if anything, it would probably be fair to say that they were *more* reliable than wooden staffs. At the very least, they were tougher and more durable than wooden staffs, so unless you obtained a particularly poor product that would degrade over time or something, they were about the most useful conduit you could get. Given enough time, both metal and wood would eventually degrade and break—but if you compared their useful life spans, metal was easily the winner.

Despite that, staffs were the norm among the mages of this world, and few even *thought* of using magic conduits made from metal instead. There was high demand for metal—especially from the knights, who wanted it for all sorts of weapons and armor—which made it expensive, and left little metal to go around for the mages even if they had wanted it.

One way or another, it had all led to the rise of a completely unfounded rumor: that metal repelled mana.

Royals and dukes, at least, had the opportunity to lay their eyes on metal-based magic conduits that had been made long ago, so they didn't believe those rumors. And of course, Zelos didn't care about the rumors in the first place—he hadn't even bothered to keep them in mind.

"Now to carve the magic formulas, eh? It's my first time actually doing it in person, so I'm kinda nervous."

As he had finished shaping the trinkets that would serve as magical conduits, the next step was to carve the appropriate magic formulas into them. These formulas made the conduits more mana-efficient, and carving them in was a necessary step for aligning the conduit with the formulas of the spells that the mages would use, allowing those mages to cast their spells in a more stable

manner. This was an important part of creating magic tools, and the challenge of making things as mana-efficient as possible was an opportunity for crafters to show what they were really made of. It was no exaggeration to say that your reputation as a crafting-specialized mage could very well depend on whether you succeeded or failed at this step.

If you didn't care too much about the stability of your casting, it wasn't *that* essential a step...but nonetheless, it was a sticking point for crafters. And Zelos especially was the sort of crafting addict who was determined to put everything he had into whatever he decided to make. The formulas flew out from the bundle of magic paper in front of him, and their letters flowed onto the ornaments he had made, embedding themselves into them.

To give a comparison, it was sort of like the visual effects used in music anime that made the notes leap off the sheet music and swirl around in the air whenever a character played their instrument. Bit by bit, the formulas were embedded into the metal rings and bracelet, forming intricate patterns as they took physical shape. Now, even if Zelos were to stop what he was doing, the formulas that he had already carved into the ornaments would remain.

Zelos didn't know how long he spent on the task. But it was, at the very least, clear that it was incredibly time-consuming work. With sweat beading on his brow, and his fatigue growing, he continued to tap away at the console he'd made from mana, issuing commands to carve the long magic formula into the little rings and the bracelet. Then, finally, he was finished—and upon confirming that he'd carved all of the formulas, Zelos released his transmutation sigil and let out a deep sigh.

“That was a lot tougher than I'd thought it'd be. Completely different from when I was doing it in game...”

While Zelos had done the same thing plenty of times before as part of *Swords & Sorceries*, this had been his first time actually transmuting with his own two hands. He could remember the sensation of carrying it out as his in-game character, but it hadn't actually been reality—nothing of the sort.

The process of working the metal was fine, in and of itself. But preparing the sigil, and the magic formulas to be carved, took a lot of time and effort.

Transmutation could also be used to create potions for healing and more—but if you *were* to use it for that, you’d need vials or other such containers to put the potions in. It wasn’t possible to also create those vials right when you were already in the middle of creating a potion. And so Zelos had gotten into the habit of collecting wine bottles from around the place and using *those* to hold his healing potions. But while he’d done so with the intent of recycling, it meant that anyone drinking those potions in broad daylight would look pretty suspicious to any clueless bystanders.

“Well, at least now I know I can use transmuting here. But...what should I *do* with these?”

In front of him were the silver-colored rings and bracelet. Zelos had just made them to test out his transmutation, but he didn’t actually need them. He already *had* excellent equipment, after all, so there was no real point now in having magic conduits best suited for intermediate mages. After finishing his crafting, he spent a good while thinking about how to best use the items, but ultimately gave up and crawled into bed before reaching an answer. Seemingly, his long hours of experimenting had worn him out enough that he’d decided the best course of action was to get a bit of shut-eye.

He was the kind of person who made anything that interested him his top priority—but once that thing was over and done with, he went back to living an aimless life. It wasn’t long until he was fast asleep, letting out calm, steady breaths.

It might have *looked* like he always acted with some sort of purpose in mind—but the truth was, he usually had none whatsoever.

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It was just a few days now until Celestina and Zweit’s summer vacation would come to an end, and the two would have to go back to living in the dormitories at the Istol Academy of Magic.

They were already starting to get ready for their departure—but neither of the two was looking forward to it. Their vacation had been two months long, but once it was over, it’d be another four months until their winter vacation, which would be the next time they could come back to the mansion.

Until that point, they wouldn't be able to take any more of Zelos's magic lessons; they'd be back to an endless parade of boring days at the academy. The thought had both of them in low spirits. As time had passed, they'd come to place more and more trust in Zelos, who taught them whatever they wanted to know. By this point, they'd even started to dabble in mixing magic potions, and they'd gained a thorough understanding of the basics.

Zelos had told them, "Never assume you'll always be perfectly ready for things. Depending on the situation, you could end up alone, and out of magic potions. And if that *does* happen, being able to make some simple potions for yourself could be the difference between life and death on the battlefield." Every day now, when the two of them finished their combat training—or perhaps it was more apt to call it a golem beat-'em-up—they set themselves up in an empty room and started poring over test tubes and beakers.

They would study the contents of those containers, trying to find out which mixture was most effective, then verify their findings in their next combat session and take notes from which to begin the cycle all over again. So far, they'd improved to the point that they were capable of making lower-grade mana potions, healing potions, and so on, and they'd probably be able to get a pretty decent price for those potions were they to sell them on the market.

Depending on how you looked at it, you could say that the two siblings had spent the past two months doing nothing but engaging in bloody combat training and holing up inside researching drugs—hardly what you'd consider a healthy lifestyle for youngsters on their break from school. Still, to the two of them, it had been an incredibly action-packed, fulfilling, enjoyable two months. But regardless, those months were now coming to an end, bringing them right back to a lifestyle of tedium.

Celestina let out a sigh.

"What—sighing again? Guess I can't blame you, though. We're getting so close to the day we'll have to go back to the academy..."

"I know we have to go, but I'm struggling to accept it. It's just making me depressed."

"Yeah, I get you. Going back's the last thing I want to do too. We can get so

much more research done here, and there's so much more we can discover..."

"I know. There are so many things I want to research—magic formulas with layered sigils, in particular."

"Yeah. When we ask Teach, he actually gives us hints. Try asking the teachers at the *academy* about that, and they just tell you to 'find out for yourself.' Looking back, I feel like I should've realized sooner that that just meant they just didn't know the answer themselves..."

"The teachers at the academy are its alumni as well, I suppose. All they know is what they were taught."

A brief history of how things turned out like this begins with the Dark God War, waged long ago. All of the world's talented mages headed to the battlefield, where they were ultimately annihilated by the Dark God's wide-area attacks. Even the heroes—and the Sages who lent those heroes their power—would have failed to defeat and seal away the Dark God were it not for the power of the divine artifacts granted to them by the four gods.

Eventually, the war came to an end. But it required a great many sacrifices—which then left society with a serious lack of talented individuals, and in turn made it unlikely that society would rebuild back to where it had been anytime soon. All that were left were second-rate mages who hadn't been part of the war—mages who'd needed everything they had simply to scrape a pass in the curriculum of the time. They hadn't managed to learn even the basics of magic formulas from the mages who'd taught them. To be precise, at least *some* of them had learned those basics...but then a pestilence swept through the land, killing off those semicapable mages as well. The problem was the corpses left on the battlefield; there was nobody to bury them, and so they simply all remained where they had fallen, leading to the spread of the plague.

Next, a unified state formed, only to decline in just about a century—raising the curtain on a new age of warring states. Each of those states sought out ancient relics, leading to yet *more* conflict that caused many precious grimoires and magic tools to be scattered and lost to time, or otherwise destroyed in the course of being used as weapons. Finally, once that long conflict was over, society reached its current era, in which all sorts of states were competing with

each other but ultimately at peace. But by the time society finally came to its senses, there were almost no mages left with a proper understanding of magic.

It had been about four hundred years since people had begun to research magic. But the twists and turns leading to the current age had driven down both the quality and quantity of mages, and those who were left were almost all the way back at square one, having to completely start over again researching what magic even was.

As a result, most of the world's magic academies were teaching that each of the fifty-six magic letters and ten magic numerals carried meaning. And while that wasn't necessarily wrong, the specifics were that meaningful magic formulas came from tying those letters together to form words—but nobody left knew that. So magic research now was just done through a slow, arduous cycle, with researchers taking spells they already had, incorporating a single new letter at a time, and seeing what difference it made.

Dragonfernal Destruction—which had been passed down through the generations of the Solistia ducal family as an heirloom spell—had gone through that process as well. But it was full of flaws.

“Looks like our own heirloom magic's got problems as well, huh?”

“It *does* use a lot more mana than it probably should, which puts a very big burden on the caster. I'm trying to make it more efficient, but I'm having a hard time. There are just too many parts I can't decipher.”

“The problem's that it only uses the caster's mana, right? And it's not very stable in transforming that mana. Sure, it's strong, but you'd be lucky if you had mana to cast it just three times, right?”

“We need to figure out a way to make it more mana-efficient, or we won't last long using it on the battlefield. It's not multilayered either, and big single-layered sigils take up so much space in your subconscious...”

The power of wide-area attack spells made their formulas more complex, and necessitated large amounts of mana. That much was obvious. But the problem was that using those spells could waste more mana than you wanted them to—potentially leaving you unable to fight when push came to shove.

As the two siblings practiced deciphering magic, their experience in real battle led them to notice the flaws in their own family's heirloom magic—which had prompted them now to try and improve on that magic. And as they did, old Creston was watching over them, seeming rather happy about the whole thing.

He must have been incredibly delighted by the growth of his two grandchildren.

Ahh...my beloved Tina. You've grown so much stronger over these past two months. Why, it could bring a tear to this old man's eye! Though now that you've become even more radiant, I can just see the riffraff coming to ask for your hand in marriage... No! I shall not allow it! Tina is mine! She will stay with me forever! Any beast that dares approach my girl had best be prepared for me to send them to the depths of hell! Death to those beasts! And war upon any who ask to marry her!

Or...perhaps not. He was still just a crazy old man obsessed over his granddaughter.

And he was boiling over with bloodlust toward her suitors—despite the fact that he was yet to actually come across any.

“Oh—by the way, Creston? I finished that thing you were asking for the other day.”

“Hmm? Already? That was certainly fast. Though I suppose I should expect no less of you, Mr. Zelos.”

“There were all sorts of unnecessary things in the formula, so it was a bit of a pain to work with...but I've optimized it as best I can, and it shouldn't place any burden on the caster now. I'd recommend giving it a try, at least.”

“My apologies. I would have liked to optimize it with my own two hands, but when you reach my age, you find it more and more difficult to learn new things, you see. I've somehow managed to *decipher* magic formulas, but when it comes to optimizing them...I know not how many more years I would need.”

“When did you even learn to decipher them...? Well, putting that aside, are you sure this was a good idea? Showing the formula for your heirloom magic to an outsider? It's...usually something you'd keep secret, isn't it?”

“Wha—?!”

Both of Zelos’s students turned around in surprise on hearing his words.

The four major ducal families—including the Solistia family—were all trying to optimize their heirloom magic. And all four had been struggling with it. But neither Zweit nor Celestina had expected their grandfather to entrust that task to Zelos.

About halfway through deciphering the magic, Zelos himself had realized it was a bit of an odd request. Still, he’d been asked to do it, and so he’d continued to work on improving the spell—albeit with a lingering sense of hesitation.

“With this, I can be sure to *deal with* any riffraff who get too close to her...” Creston let out an unnerving laugh, a dangerous glint in his eyes as he took the bundle of magic paper from Zelos.

His grandchildren retorted in unison: “Grandfather?!”

“Wh-What is it? Don’t surprise me like that! I thought my heart might just stop!”

“The hell are you showing our heirloom magic to Teach for? Wasn’t that meant to be a secret? Something we don’t show to anyone outside the family?!”

“Yes—and besides, we’ve been working on that spell ourselves...”

“Mr. Zelos’s magic far exceeds anything we know! What harm could it do to show him at this point?”

Heirloom spells were passed down through the four major ducal families that protected the royal family of the Magic Kingdom of Solistia; they were absolutely *not* the kind of thing you should be showing to an outsider. Yet Creston had apparently just shown it to Zelos as if it were nothing, and it had his grandchildren doubting his sanity.

“M-Master... Please don’t tell anybody about—”

“I know. Especially since, well, you know, I got a little carried away and made it stronger too while I was at it. I have no intention of teaching this to other

people. It's too dangerous."

"You too! What were you thinking?!"

"You made it stronger? I've looked at the formula myself, and it's got a very delicate balance to it—in a bad way. Parts that look like nonsense are somehow fulfilling some core role. So Master, how did you...?"

"Y-Yes! Yes! With this, I can kill those bastards who try to..." Another mad laugh.

"Grandfather! What do you mean, *kill*?!" Both grandchildren responded as one again.

It was as if Zelos had handed a knife to a madman. The old noble had already loaded the spell's magic formula into his subconscious, and there was a crazed smile to his face. From here on out, any nobles who tried to ask for Celestina's hand in marriage would be playing with fire. Or...perhaps rather than merely *playing* with fire, they would be pieces of wood throwing themselves directly *into* the fire.

One way or another, Creston was ready and willing to kill.

"Anyway, your herbs are changing color there, you know? It's time to add your mana ether. Then comes the mandrake powder."

"Don't just change the topic!"

"Well, I don't really care whether your grandfather annihilates some miscreants. Honestly, if they're the kind of rotten nobles who're just lusting after power, they probably *deserve* to be burned to death."

"Ha ha ha... He's right. I'll cleanse the world of their *filth*!"

Zelos was clearly being irresponsible. Mages were generally indifferent to the broader state of the world to begin with, showing no interest in things outside of their research—and Zelos was a good example of just that. Though even he was starting to feel a *bit* of guilt about it now...

Creston seemed almost like a volcano, liable to erupt at any moment and set the world ablaze. He was entirely willing to become a demon lord, dark god, or anything else if it was for the sake of his beloved granddaughter.

“Oh—you should probably hurry up and take that off the flame. If you let it boil any longer, it’ll get a horrible bitter taste.”

Zweit sighed. “Fine. We’ll talk later. We *are* dealing with fire here, I guess.”

“Grandfather... Why are you going so far?”

Wearing heat-resistant gloves, the students picked up the beakers that had been heating up over the fire and placed them on the table.

Inside was a clear yellow liquid, which changed color to green as it cooled.

“Now to add the mandrake powder...”

“Mandrakes, huh? I remember harvesting some back in the Far-Flung Green Depths...not that I *want* to remember it. The attacks from those things hit right to your soul.”

“I know how you feel, Brother...”

The siblings couldn’t help but cast their minds back to the day they’d been subjected to a barrage of devastating mental attacks from the mandrakes...

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This is a story from a little while ago, when Zelos was still in the Far-Flung Green Depths on a training camp with Celestina and Zweit.

Having had their food stolen in a monster attack, the party was out hunting for more food to try and survive on. The monsters had also stolen all of their healing potions and other resources of the sort, so they were left needing to supply themselves with more on the spot.

Fortunately for the party, Zweit had brought along some tools and materials to use for experiments, allowing the party to create some healing potions. Though of course, they would have to get the *ingredients* for those potions from the forest itself.

“There are a good number of herbs growing over there, but we’ll need some drugshrooms and chemileaves as well. Oh, and probably mandrakes too, I suppose.”

“Master? I’ve heard that if you hear a mandrake’s scream, you’ll die; is that

true?”

“Hmm...in a figurative sense, perhaps. It’s hard for the human spirit to endure those screams...”

“But you don’t *actually* die, then, right? That’ll be *easy*, then!”

“Oh, if only it were that simple...” Zelos let out an unnerving laugh.

“Wh-Why do your eyes look so dead, Teach?!”

“M-Master? You’re kind of scaring me...”

The siblings had yet to fully understand the terror of the mandrakes.

The party continued to roam around the forest, hunting for food. And then...

“Ah, there we go—there’s a big growth of mandrakes over there. Let’s get straight to pulling them out.”

“They’re just plants, right? What’s meant to be so scary about them?”

“I’m...getting a bad feeling about this.”

Celestina’s bad feeling was justified. As soon as the three of them divided the labor between them and began to pull out the mandrakes...

AAAAHHHH!

STOP! PLEASE! I’VE GOT A FAMILY! I— AAAARGH!

DADDY! HEL— GAKH!

Y-Y-YOU DEMONS! YOU KILLED...MY DAUGHTER...

Zweit and Celestina broke immediately. Their spirits were unable to withstand the screams; after all, they were designed specifically to gouge at people’s hearts.

“What the hell *is* this? It’s like I’m getting stabbed in the heart!”

“It feels like I’m going to go crazy. My conscience is torturing me...”

“Really? It’s not that bad once you get used to it, you know.”

P-PLEASE! PLEASE, HAVE MERCY! DON’T DEFILE ME ANY MORE! HAVEN’T YOU HAD ENOUGH?!

STOP! I'M BEGGING YOU! YOU BRUTE!

YOU'RE TERRIBLE... HOW CAN I EVEN GO ON LIVING NOW...?

UGH...CURSE YOU! DO YOU HAVE NO SOUL?!

"Yes, yes, I'm a brute, I know. What about it?"

The siblings were shocked. "H-How are you...okay?"

"I've been helping cultivate these things at the church, so I've had plenty of time to get used to it. Aha ha ha..."

"I'm not sure you should *want* to get used to it, Teach..."

"The guilt... I can't..."

At the end of the day, they were just plants—and Zelos had already gotten used to seeing them as such.

Plus, when you were on the precipice between life and death, you didn't have the luxury of worrying about that kind of thing anyway.

Zelos understood that now, and he was pulling out the mandrakes without a care in the world.

Left with no other choice, the siblings kept it up as well. However...

NOOOO! MOMMY? WHERE ARE YOU? IT'S SO DARK... HELP...M—

SHE WAS JUST A LITTLE GIRL! A CURSE ON YOU, YOU DEMONS!

The endless barrage of screams rendered the two of them completely unable to act. Unable to endure the mandrakes' direct attacks on their consciences, they gave up in no time at all.

By the time the two of them returned to camp that night, their eyes looked empty, and they were hanging their heads, muttering to themselves. Mentally, they were well and truly at the end of their rope.

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"Ugh... I never wanna get used to that. Even when you plug your ears, their screams still pierce straight to your heart."

"Whoever else harvests them must have to put up with the same thing,

though, mustn't they? Are they really okay? I'm worried they could lose their sense of humanity..."

"If it were *humans* making those screams, it'd be one thing...but at the end of the day, they're plants. And it's survival of the fittest—nothing new for this world."

"Are you a demon or something, Teach? I just don't get how you can deal with that..."

The mandrakes' psychological attacks had just about completely stopped working on Zelos, who'd been continuing to harvest the mandrakes at the church.

Compared to other animals, humans were particularly good at adjusting to their environment—and there was no limit to how cruel and callous they could become.

"What are you saying? They're *plants*, you know? I can't say anything for sure, but as a general rule, I just can't imagine that plants would be able to understand and feel human emotions. Probably. Just think of them as materials and it...shouldn't be that bad, I suppose?"

"No...even then, I feel like something's gotta be wrong with you as a person if you're able to get used to *that*. I get what you're saying, though."

"It just...feels like they're stabbing at the deepest part of my heart! Like they're completely destroying my spirit..."

"Are you saying that cows and pigs don't have any emotions, then? Is it really any more justifiable to live off eating those? Why are you fussing over some *plants* so much, at this point?"

Celestina and Zweit both winced.

Zelos was right: they could talk about the mandrakes' psychological attacks all they wanted, but ultimately, it was all just hypocrisy if they were sustaining themselves on the meat of dead animals.

The only difference was that they weren't usually there to *see* those animals being butchered; however much they might have tried to rationalize it, the fact

of the matter was that they were living off eating those animals. Any idealistic morals they might have had were already too compromised to worry about at this point.

“At the end of the day, it’s just about how you categorize things inside your head, I think. You just need to have gratitude for the sustenance that keeps you going, and bloodlust for your enemies.”

The siblings were silent.

It still wasn’t known why exactly mandrakes screamed like they did.

But whatever the reason, the siblings would have a far easier time learning alchemy if they were able to just see the mandrakes as plants and harvest them, rather than being immobilized by their psychological attacks. Sooner or later, they might need to create potions in a pinch; if they couldn’t bring themselves to harvest the mandrakes at a crucial time, right when they needed them, they wouldn’t be able to do so.

Materials weren’t always going to be the easiest things to come by.

“Okay, enough chitchat. Let’s get those hands moving now, okay? I want you to learn how to make intermediate-level potions by the end of today. Even if you’re using the same general recipes as other alchemists, there’ll always be little differences in how you mix things, so I want you to test out all sorts of little changes to how you mix things and get the rest of the way yourself.”

The two weren’t entirely satisfied, but they got back to focusing on the task at hand.

“I guess intermediate mana potions *are* pretty important for mages, huh? It’s easy to run out of mana.”

“I think it’s probably similar to when you’re actually using magic: if you can’t control your mana consumption, you’ll simply end up collapsing and becoming a burden. So I imagine it’d be quite an advantage if you were able to create your own potions.”

“Yeah, it’ll be pretty big if we can have a way of recovering our mana. I know it can be a problem if you drink too much, though...”

Potions were something you drank, so they were mostly made up of water. All you actually needed for the healing effect were the active ingredients, but the water served to fix those ingredients in a dispersion and preserve them. And if you had too much to drink, all that water could accumulate in your stomach.

Stomachaches could be an issue on the battlefield, and they were mainly caused by excess water intake—which was, in turn, often caused by drinking a lot of healing potions. It was all well and good that they were easy to drink, but if you used them at the wrong time, they could actually make you *less* useful in the next fight, and the only way of learning the best way to use them was to get experience.

With that done, the two were taught methods for concentrating the composition of healing potions—which brought an end to the day's edition of "Mr. Zelos's Alchemy Class." Tomorrow, the siblings would need to start preparing in earnest for their return to the academy.

These past two months of fulfillment would be coming to an end in just a few more days.

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Fun times never lasted long.

Precisely *because* you got so immersed in them, it was easy to forget about the flow of time and get absorbed in what you were doing—and then, before you realized it, the sun would be setting. That was especially common with young children.

It was also what had happened to Zweit and Celestina—and now, already, they were set to head off to the Istol Academy of Magic tomorrow.

They'd be departing early in the morning, so they had an early night. Since there could be bandits on the roads, they were going to head to the city of Cezan by boat. From there, they'd be taking a short carriage ride to Stihla, a city run directly by the royal family—and the location of the academy.

In terms of distance, the Far-Flung Highway offered a shorter route. But taking a boat would get them to their destination quicker.

If you were traveling by carriage, you'd need to let the horses rest at some point. And the distance between villages and cities was uneven, so sometimes you'd need to set up camp for the night. But with a boat, all you needed to do was have a different crew member take over at the helm. The route was a little less direct, but you could head straight to Cezan without stopping.

From there, it was just a few safe hours by carriage to Stihla, where the academy was located.

"Hmm? Weren't you traveling the whole way by carriage the first time I met you? Why was that? If the boat's quicker now, I feel like it would've been quicker then too..."

Creston chimed in with an explanation: "Going there is one thing, but to come *back* by boat, you need to travel upstream on the river. You'd be relying on the wind—and with bad enough weather, 'twould be hard to know just how long it would take before you arrived."

"Ahh... So you'd be at nature's mercy if you took the river back here, then. I suppose the wind *would* change direction depending on the season; I can certainly see that making things slower."

"Indeed. If not for that, I myself would have been able to come back faster by boat...but the wind is a fickle thing. Leave too much to its whims, and you relinquish your control over when you arrive."

On the way to Cezan, you could simply rely on the current to carry your boat, and you'd arrive without having to really do anything. But on the way back, you'd be going *against* the current. The boats here were just sailing boats; they were reliant on the winds, and could be left at a standstill if they were unable to catch a good one. What was more, changes in the direction of the wind would cause the boat to travel in a zigzag, making the trip take even longer than expected. There was no guarantee that you'd arrive in the few days you'd set aside.

Just for a moment, Zelos wondered whether he should help convert the boats here into steamboats. But even if it were possible to replace fuel with magic, it wouldn't change the fact that there just weren't enough people. Steamboats needed people to maintain them, and the boilers that powered them had to be

constantly watched over. As you might expect, Zelos didn't intend to cheat technology to bring that into the world; he wanted to minimize his impact here as much as possible. So he forced himself to stay quiet about that particular idea, pushing it deep down inside himself.

He was yearning for a quiet life, after all.

"That makes sense. Can't go against the laws of nature, I suppose."

"If magical technology were a tad more advanced, it might be possible...but alas. For now, it is not."

Part of Zelos wanted to say, *I'm sorry. I could actually make the technology right now if I wanted to.* But he held back, swallowing the words. He hadn't gone to a technical college for nothing, and he already had both knowledge of simple steam engine design and his isekai cheat powers. But if he carelessly started a technological revolution, it *would* lead to war. So, knowing that he couldn't just recklessly induce a technological revolution here like that, he feigned ignorance.

"Hey, Grandfather. Are you sure we can't just pull out of the academy? I feel like it'd be way more efficient for us to just keep learning from Teach..."

"I understand how you feel, but doing so would disgrace our family name. As problematic as it is, the academy does have quite the prestigious reputation, after all."

Celestina was in agreement with her brother: "Honestly, I can't see what we would even learn there. Do we *really* need to go back? We're learning about potions here, and magic tools, and how to make and use magic formulas... It's all so much more advanced than what they teach at the academy! I don't see the benefit in us going back."

"You may be right, but that still isn't enough of a reason for the two of you to withdraw. Remember, we need to keep the facts about Mr. Zelos a secret—and as nobles, it's important for both of you to think about your futures and use your time there to find people who will serve under you in the years to come. True, it may not have any uses beyond being a place to socialize and find aides...but that is better than having *no* uses. Even a place like *that* can be useful."

As blunt as Creston was about the place's drawbacks, the fact remained that the Istol Academy of Magic was a prestigious school with a long track record of impressive results—albeit nothing compared to Zelos's. It was influential enough that withdrawing from the place without a proper reason would indeed be a wound on your family name. Creston sent a glance toward Zelos, silently pleading for help.

Left without a choice, Zelos heaved a deep sigh, and pulled a certain few items out from his inventory.

“Zweit. Celestina. I'd like to give you these.”

“M-Master? What are these?”

“Rings...and a bracelet? And those are... Those are magic formulas carved into them!”

“These are some magic conduits I made; you can use them in place of a staff. I want the two of you to try them out and see how they feel while you're at the academy. I'd really appreciate it if you could write down your thoughts and send me some reports while you're there.”

“Wha—?!” The two siblings were dumbfounded.

When a mage granted a magic conduit—generally a staff—to their student, it signified that they had recognized that student as a full-fledged mage. It was as if they were telling their student, “Take the magic I taught you and use it as you see fit”; in a sense, it was something like a certificate. So for the two siblings, it signified both an honor and a sense of responsibility.

Zelos himself, however, had no way of knowing that he'd essentially just taken part in a ritual that signified his recognition of the pair as full-fledged mages.

The magic conduits he had handed them had no special effects whatsoever; they simply worked the same as regular magic staffs, nothing more. So he hadn't even placed too much significance on them. Still, it was doubtless that his creations would fetch a pretty good price if they were sold. After all, magic conduits made from metal were unique—a rarity.

Zelos handed Celestina the silver-colored bracelet, which looked almost as if

the magic formula carved into it was a decoration. And to Zweit, he handed the two rings, into which he had carved geometric patterns that seemed a fine work of craftsmanship. Both the bracelet and the rings were first-class items, not only as magic tools but also just as beautifully finished ornaments.

“Celestina, I want you to use the bracer. Zweit, I’ll give you the rings.”

“Why are there *two* rings, Teach? I’m...guessing it’s not like one of them’s a spare or something, right?”

“Try giving one to your younger brother, please. I’d be happy if he could give me a report on it too, like I’ve asked of you two. At least, I’d appreciate it if he did.”

Zelos had tried to put the ornaments to use himself, but he hadn’t been able to find any use for them. If they were just going to sit uselessly in the bottom of a drawer—or rather, his inventory—he’d be happier if someone else could make use of them instead and tell him how they felt to use. There wasn’t much point in him using this equipment himself; it’d be much easier to ascertain how well it worked if someone of lower level used it. In short, it was just an experiment, and what he’d made were prototypes.

“Give it to *Croesus*? I can’t imagine the bastard would *accept* it, though...”

“If that’s how it is, that’s how it is. Oh, and I’ve got some homework for the two of you as well.”

“Homework?!”

The siblings exchanged glances. They didn’t have the slightest clue as to what sort of unreasonable demand the absurd Great Sage was about to make of them—what sort of harsh trial he wanted to put them through now.

“While the two of you are at the academy, I want you to work on making your heirloom magic more efficient and more powerful. Of course, I don’t care whether the two of you go at it together or decide to look into it separately. If you manage to improve some other spells too, that’s even better. And if you succeed, I’ll make you the best magic conduits I possibly can.”

“Th-The best magic conduits you can...” Zweit and Celestina were both entranced by the thought.

They didn't know exactly what to expect of magic conduits made by a Great Sage, but they knew that his *best*, should they manage to get their hands on them, would undoubtedly be at the level of national treasures. And having him bestow those treasures upon *them* would allow them to justify saying that they'd been deemed the successors of that Sage. All of a sudden, the two of them were brimming with motivation.

Zelos, however, knew that they were going to fail this bit of homework. Having modified the same spell himself at Creston's request, he was aware that it wasn't something so simple that his students, who had only fiddled with the basics, would be able to improve on it just yet.

In other words, his plan was entirely just to encourage the two of them to carry out research of their own accord.

"All *right*! You're on!"

"I promise you, I'll get this homework done!"

Hmm? Why are they this motivated all of a sudden? That's a bit more than I was expecting...

But Zelos was taking the situation too lightly. He'd motivated them in a way he hadn't intended to.

Sure, he was pretty confident that they'd fail...but even on the tiny chance that they *did* succeed, that wasn't going to be a big problem either.

Zelos saying that he would make them some new equipment if they succeeded was sort of the equivalent of dangling a carrot in front of their faces to motivate them—but from the perspective of the two students, it was their chance to get their hands on magic conduits made by a Great Sage. And if those conduits would be his *best*, then receiving one would be an honor greater than receiving an award from the king himself for a mage. No, this went beyond honor, in fact. It would be about on par with being blessed by a god. But none of them involved in this little promise were aware of the discrepancy in values between the two who had grown up in this world and the man who had grown up on Earth.

The only one who *was* aware was Creston—and as he watched it all play out,

he nodded, a contented smile on his face.

*

The next morning, with a fog hanging over Santor, the two mages got onto a carriage. They were ready to tackle the task they had been given by the Great Sage himself—and to earn the magic tools they had been promised as proof of their success.

The carriage set off toward Stihla. Zweit and Celestina, carrying the weight of the next generation of mages on their shoulders, were returning to the academy in mightily high spirits.

At the same time, today was the day that Zelos was back to being unemployed. Having now lost his tutoring job, he was left alone, racking his brain over what to do next. He'd known that this was coming, but now that the day had actually come, he was feeling rather downhearted.

It was time for a new chapter in his life: unemployment.

Chapter 9: The Old Guy Lucks into Finding Rice

It had been three days since Celestina and Zweit had gone back to the Istol Academy of Magic. The house that the duke had granted Zelos was now complete, and he'd finished moving in.

There was a faint smell of soil in the air, and the worms that emerged as Zelos tilled the field showed how rich it was. Good soil was full of creatures like that, all eating up foreign matter in the fields and fertilizing the ground. You could even eat them directly—but considering the work required to get rid of all the dirt inside them first, Zelos decided not to bother. For now, he just wanted to create some ridges in the field. He sank his hoe into the recently flattened ground, and a smile came to his face as he thought about the sorts of things he'd end up growing there.

“Well, then... I guess this is my new home. But what should I *do* with myself?”

Up until just a few days ago, Zelos had been working as a private tutor, teaching magic to a son and daughter of the duke. But now, he was unemployed.

“I've got enough money, but having no job just *looks* kinda bad... I mean, between the rights to the spell book I improved and my income from the private tutor stuff, I've got plenty of money. Enough that I'd struggle to use it all up. Still, doing nothing *but* farming would be kind of boring, so...” Zelos paused for a second, thinking. “Should I go and do some part-time work with Nagri and the others? I don't know...”

Farming was just one of Zelos's many hobbies; he didn't see it as a full-time occupation. It was a similar case for other farmers in this world as well, each of them making a living by doing some other job in addition to their farmwork.

The problem, however, was that Zelos saw things differently from those people. He didn't even consider his farming to be a part-time job, but rather just a hobby of sorts, so he was reluctant to simply “be a farmer.”

While he had his incredible powers as a mage, those ultimately weren't something he'd *earned*, so he didn't really feel like he could be proud of them. Similarly, he still knew everything he'd learned from going to an engineering college on Earth, but he wasn't interested in using that knowledge to cheat his way through life here.

Zelos had built up a considerable sum of money in his two months here, and he didn't feel the need to spend it on anything. He just wanted to earn a meager sum with his *own* abilities, and use *that* to get by in life.

He had a—quite frankly—meaningless obsession with that particular nuance, and a warped, tiresome personality to go with it. What was more, he was a timid person at heart. Combined, this meant that while his considerable talents let him stand well above others, he had a strong aversion to taking the initiative in anything.

When he was working as a private tutor, he'd simply gone with the flow. All he'd done was make it through each day by leveraging his skills from working through the global financial crisis; his knowledge from *Swords & Sorceries*, as best as it could be applied to his new reality; and the sense of authority he'd built up by leading an endless slog of all-nighters in crunch time.

And in his heart, he was terrified of just what sort of impact he'd had on his students.

Now, however, it was time for farming. Zelos looked out at the seeds he'd planted in his field, and felt a little...perplexed.

"So I got seeds for two root vegetables—the sexy daikon and the faturnip—as well as some for maximum spinach and buster lettuce. But what even *are* these names? Where'd the 'maximum' and 'buster' come from? And who even named these things in the first place? It's a mystery. Quite an interesting one, actually..."

Zelos's attention had been taken by a strange tangent—perhaps because his years living as essentially a shut-in had warped his personality. Still, it wasn't as though he'd been bothered by that change in himself, so...maybe it wasn't a problem?

"Given the size of the field, I'd like to raise some chickens as well. Wonder if

they're selling some anywhere? Maybe I should take a look around the neighborhood. I'd really like to have some fresh eggs."

Zelos continued to plan out his slow life in his newly built home, wondering bit by bit about what he should do from now on.

For starters, he was a fan of tamago kake gohan. And if he wanted to eat it, he'd need some chickens for their eggs. But first, there was another, even bigger hurdle to clear:

"So. Rice. Does it even exist here? I've seen a lot of places selling *other* grains, but..."

Even if he managed *that*, the lack of soy sauce would be his next problem.

"Looks like we've got some 'jackbeans'... I'm guessing those are some kind of bean, at least. But are they soybeans? Or more like mung beans or something? Could be azuki beans too, I guess. Well, I guess for now I'll just grow them, even if I don't know."

It was some kind of reddish-brown bean, but Zelos had no way of knowing specifically what type it was. He tried using his Appraisal skill on it, but all it told him was that it was "A very common bean. Widely eaten in this world."

His Appraisal skill was incredibly fickle. It generally gave him the information he needed, so it was definitely convenient...but he would've preferred for it to lose the habit of sometimes giving him descriptions that were only a few words long.

Zelos wondered whether the skill somehow had emotions. Occasionally, it'd give him nothing but a word or two—"plate," or "stone," or "magic stone." He couldn't shake the suspicion that someone was managing the skill manually and just giving him whatever information they felt like based on their mood at the time.

"I wonder if it's trying to teach me to not rely on it too much? Sure is demanding, then, isn't it..."

As Zelos thought, he rested his chin on the handle of his hoe and let out a puff of cigarette smoke. And just as he did, a number of dwarves came out from his newly built home. They were the workers from Hamber Construction—the

company that had built the house.

They were active in a wide range of fields, being able to build everything from regular homes to castles, as well as roads and even interior furniture. They won the tender process for most large projects, their reliable work having earned them a widespread reputation.

Most of the company's workers were dwarven crafters, and they were reliable enough that even the crafters' guild couldn't meddle in their work. What was more, they were very particular about their jobs, having earned the trust of the people for their well-honed skills and their absolute refusal to cut any corners.

After all, they handled most things within the broader realm of crafting themselves, and everyone registered with the crafters' guild were their apprentices. In that sense, they had control over even the crafters' guild itself—but they were all quite active individuals with no interest in the trivial details and administrative work of it all, so they left things like paperwork to other people.

That was perhaps the saving grace that had allowed the guild to cling to its outward appearances so far.

Regardless, the fact of the matter was that Hamber Construction really wasn't a group that you wanted to make an enemy of—in more ways than one.

"Hey, Zelos. We've finished up over here."

"Thanks for all your work, Nagri. You've been a big help."

"Eh, don't worry about it. This is just part of the job—and you're letting us do what we want, so it's a job we're happy to do."

The builders took pride in their work, and refused to compromise whatsoever. If they completed a job exactly according to the initial design, and then you came in *after* the fact requesting changes, you could expect to be met with a royal beating.

Before construction started, they'd listen attentively to any requests clients had, then plan with those requests in mind and meet to discuss them. They took great care in going through final checks before getting started on the job,

so they got quite mad when clients came back and *then* tried requesting changes to the design on a whim. And naturally, the list of clients they'd beaten up for that included no shortage of nobles.

In fact, more than half of the people who'd filed complaints or tried to butt in were nobles. The next largest group to do so were merchants.

Because they had power and money, they tended to order people around with a condescending attitude, and they assumed that they could do the same to the crafters from Hamber Construction. But the crafters there had such pride in their work that they'd be willing to throw a punch at even the king if they weren't happy with him. Anyone who got carried away with themselves would be in for a painful lesson.

Setting aside their personalities and their somewhat questionable tenets, the fact remained that their results were more than satisfactory. Their work was thorough enough that the royals refused to intervene in their behavior.

"By the way, the next job we've got coming up looks like it's gonna be a pain. Reckon you could lend us a hand?"

"I don't know when exactly I intend to start working, but...maybe, depending on the details. It's not like I can do *everything*, after all."

"The gist of it is, we're meant to be building a bridge somewhere, but it's in a pretty dangerous spot. The river there's stupidly powerful, so I don't even know how we're meant to build the foundations."

"Powerful? How much? And why are you asking *me* for help with it?"

"Your magic's the safest bet I can think of. We haven't learned Mana Control yet. We've managed to get the road *leading* to the river built, but we just can't build the bridge."

It looked like Nagri wanted Zelos to help using the spell he'd recently made available for sale: Gaia Control.

The spell had spread from farmers to builders in a flash, and Hamber Construction here had been particularly quick to acquire it. But since most of the company's workers were dwarven crafters, they weren't accustomed to using and controlling magic.

Basic construction work was one thing, but building bridge foundations right in the middle of a raging river would be an order of magnitude more difficult. And since heavy construction equipment wasn't a thing in this world, the work all needed to be done by hand—which would inevitably result in at least a casualty or two.

Even just falling over in the raging river would be a major risk of death. In the worst-case scenario, it might not even be possible to recover the body.

That was why they had chosen to seek aid from Great Sage Zelos, who was practically a game-changing, all-purpose piece of construction equipment in human form.

It's kind of sad to be treated like I'm just a bucket-wheel excavator or a bulldozer or something...

“Hey! Why are you crying?”

“Ah...no. It's nothing. I just got something in my eye...”

Sometimes, you just needed to have a bit of a cry. And for Zelos, this was one of those times, as he realized that all that was expected of him in this building job was to serve as a piece of machinery.

As a company, it was only natural for Hamber Construction to seek out talented workers. But the dwarves probably didn't even realize that they were ultimately seeing Zelos not as a human, but as a lump of construction equipment.

It was less like they were requesting the help of a person and more like they were trying to reserve the use of a particularly impressive machine for a day. Or at least, that was how it felt to Zelos, through the lens of his persecution complex...

“So? When's the job going to start?”

“Next week. If you could just help us secure the foundations for the bridge, we should be able to manage the rest ourselves.”

Right now, the dwarves' magic was just good enough to connect foundations that had already been built and use them to support the shape of a bridge. They

hadn't yet refined their magic enough to be able to actually create the initial foundations of that bridge right in a roaring river.

If they *were* to try and go ahead with the job without Zelos's help, they'd have to just keep using their magic over and over—to devote themselves to practicing before even starting the job, all while knowing that they might have to end up turning it down anyway if they still couldn't manage it.

It was dangerous work—and with that in mind, they'd been planning to seriously improve the standard of their abilities.

"All right. I'll slot it into my schedule for next week."

"Are you really sure you don't just wanna forget about that farming stuff and come work for us properly?"

"I worry that if I did, I'd only be taking work away from you all. I feel like even just doing work on the foundations is going to be taking a fair bit of work away from you and your people."

"Hmm. You're not wrong. Should we just treat you as a temporary helper, then? Like you're showing us how it's done, or something?"

"Yeah. If I don't leave *some* dangerous work for them to do, they won't be able to get any better at magic..."

Zelos's answer made perfect sense to Nagri. Certainly, if they brought on Zelos as a permanent asset, their work would become a lot more efficient—but they themselves wouldn't have the opportunity to train and improve. And if that happened, they'd inevitably end up struggling down the track when Zelos *wasn't* there, making it likely in turn that they'd screw up some important thing sooner or later. For crafters, that wasn't a risk they were willing to take.

The construction industry, in particular, was essential to people's daily lives. And it was with that in mind that Hamber Construction took their work seriously, showing zero willingness to compromise. The builders were creating places where people would spend their *lives*, and that made them take pride in their work. But if they relied on Zelos too much, they could end up throwing away that pride they held as builders.

"We're doing drills to train our magic, but we just can't seem to get the

skill...”

“It’s the kind of thing that you can really only succeed at if you keep it up until you collapse. Keep going until you’re out of mana, over and over and over again, and you should be able to learn it. It’ll be tough, but give it your best shot.”

“Ahhh. That’d make sense. We haven’t gone that far. Since using up all your mana makes you just fall over on the spot, as you’d know. It’s a pain to carry them all off when they collapse, so we were trying to do it in moderation...”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll have any chance of learning it unless you push yourself right to your limits at least once.”

“So it’s one of those ‘know your own limits’ things, eh? Damn, the goddesses are harsh.”

The goddesses? Aha ha ha... The goddesses, huh? Those assholes don’t even deserve such a fancy-sounding title. They should just be called “the wretches” or something instead...

Zelos was far from fond of the four so-called goddesses. There were so many things he’d left behind on Earth. Or, from another perspective, things that had been stolen away from him due to the goddesses’ reckless actions. He held a deep grudge toward them.

“Jeez, you’ve got a crazy look on your face right now! Someone could report you for that, and I don’t think you’d even be able to make any excuses for it...”

“The gods are my enemies. I’ll never be able to forgive them.” Zelos let out a mirthless laugh—quiet at first, then increasing in volume.

“I dunno what happened to you, but seriously, I wouldn’t be surprised if some believer got the wrong idea about you and thought you were a danger or something. What I’m saying is just...look, it’s not my fault if one of them tries to kill you, okay?”

“Tell them to bring it on. I’d be more than happy to turn the tables on them.” Another low laugh.

He saw the goddesses’ *followers* as his enemies too.

“By the way: nothing important, but those plants you got in the field there are gonna grow real fast. You sure you’ll be able to make it back in time to harvest them?”

“Huh?! Seriously? I didn’t think it’d be *that* quick...”

“Well, you see, those veggies there can grow seriously fast. Similar for the herbs and things too. If you don’t plan out a day to harvest them, they’ll start reproducing like crazy.”

It sounded like vegetables here had a lot more vitality to them than the ones back on Earth.

Once you planted them, they’d sprout overnight, and they’d be ready for harvesting in just two weeks. This was largely due to the effect of mana, which circulated through the plants’ cellular tissue and served to accelerate their growth.

It wasn’t as if living *creatures* would grow faster just because they had mana. Rather, activities like eating and exercising would slowly shape them into the condition best suited to their environment.

Plants, however, were constantly absorbing nutrients from the earth through their roots, and they had photosynthesis as well—opening up a major gap between the growth rates of creatures and plants. What was more, they could absorb mana directly from the earth. The result of all this was that plants here didn’t just grow incredibly quickly; they also took less than half the time to spread their seeds around the surrounding area and sprout anew. Left alone, the field could end up completely blanketed by plants in no time at all.

“Well, that’s a problem. Do you think I’ll have to hire a slave or something?”

“No need to hire one; if you need one, just buy them. Hiring them can be pretty expensive, you know? It’d be more economical to just buy one, rather than hiring them from a slave trader.”

“If I bought one, though, I’d have to pay all sorts of upkeep costs for their food and the like...”

“You’ll make that back easy, working with us!”

“Are you just casually trying to talk me into working for you some more? As your convenient little foundation-layer?”

Nagri hesitated to answer for a moment. And then, under his breath: “*Damn. He got me.*”

No company would be willing to let such a promising piece of machinery—or rather, “human resource”—slip by them.

It was as if the dwarves were using old construction equipment, from a generation or more ago, while Zelos was a brand-new, state-of-the-art bit of machinery. There was no way a company in the construction industry would let itself miss out on that sort of opportunity.

“I just want to grow some wheat and get by. Spending all my time doing manual labor at a construction site is a little bit, uh...”

“Wheat, is it? Are you going to make a paddy or something? Where are you going to get the water from?”

Zelos paused. Then, with a hint of concern: “What?”

“Well, you said you’re going to be growing wheat, right? So you’ll need a paddy. With water.”

In this world, wheat was something that you grew in water-flooded paddies.

It was a different world, after all. Even the crops that Zelos knew could have completely different attributes from what he was used to on Earth.

“There’s no way I’ll be able to set up a paddy on this land. If only I had some rice, at least...”

“Can you actually *eat* that weed of a thing? It’s all over the place ’round here, if you want it.”

“*What?!*”

“Huh? You’re talking about riceweed, yeah? You can find it just about anywhere ’round these parts. Look, you’re standing next to some right now.”

A single weed was growing by Zelos’s feet. And as he took a closer look, he could see what seemed to be a few grains of rice at its tip. It closely resembled

what Zelos remembered of rice back on Earth. Without a moment's delay, he activated his Appraisal skill.

*

Riceweed

A simple weed that grows everywhere. Highly reproductive, and grows at an impressive rate.

While the plant's seeds can be eaten, doing so is uncommon in this world. Its slightly sweet scent and the faintly sweet flavor it gains when cooked are exquisite. But the plant inhibits the growth of other crops, so it is frequently culled as a forgettable weed.

Can be harvested seven times in a single year.

*

Did I seriously find rice? Just like that?! And damn, the thing seems to have a bad reputation here!

What was more, it apparently had amazing reproductive capabilities. Going from what Appraisal had said, it apparently tasted amazing, but nobody even thought to eat it because of how it multiplied in such a weed-like way. Since it inhibited the growth of other crops, it was the first thing weeded out from any field.

As a Japanese person, I can't just stand by and let them treat rice like this. It seems like its reproductive capabilities could be a concern, though... Should I wall off the area around it to stop it from multiplying too much? Partitioning the field would make it easier to harvest just the "weeds"; it'd be something like what we've done with the mandrakes. Still, what should I do if the seeds scatter outside of the partition I make for it? Apparently a single weed can multiply like crazy. So couldn't it get completely out of control in just about a month? I can't guarantee I'll never be away from the house for that long, so I'll have to plan ahead, separate them well, and make sure I've got a proper, reliable source of

rice... Oh—if it's got such a high reproductive ability, then I feel like it might sprout early too. Should I make a dryer for it? If so, I'd have to mine the metal I need from somewhere, then make the parts using transmutation and power it with...magic stones? No. That wouldn't provide enough mana. It'd probably be faster to do it by repurposing a magic formula to gather mana from the environment and supply it that way...

The discovery of rice had sent Zelos's mind into overdrive. If there was rice, he could make koji; and if he had koji, he could ferment it into miso and soy sauce. He could also create sake—a thought that filled him with excitement as he had thought he'd lost that particular joy upon being brought to this new world.

That was just how much he longed for a drink of sake.

"I'll have to get to growing some, then. It's time for the revival of rice culture! Right in my own yard! I'm *sick* of having porridge!"

"Really, though, answer me. Can you seriously *eat* that weed?"

"It's not a weed; it's actually made for eating. Well, it's something like wheat, essentially."

"Oh? I'd love to give it a try, then."

"I'll need to have enough of it first, mind you. And I won't be able to get to that point unless I grow it."

Zelos had an easy path to getting his hands on some rice now. He never would've expected it to be growing by his feet as a weed—but now that he knew, he was quick to spring into action.

"All righty, then! Let's get to dividing up the field! Rice will be mine once again!"

"*Someone's* mighty motivated, eh? Well, if you do a good job, give me a taste of some."

"I can't make any promises, but I do want to get results as soon as I can. I'll treat you to a meal if I manage to get there."

"Sure! I've got high expectations!"

“Don’t put too much pressure on me, please. I can’t cook anything too amazing.”

“Bah! I’m just interested to see what kind of thing it is. Anyway, I should be off to my next worksite now. I’ll be counting on you next week!”

Waving as he left, Nagri set off toward his next worksite. Zelos watched as he walked off into the distance.

While it was already decided that he’d be helping out with construction work next week, he now had something he wanted to get done beforehand.

His mission: to obtain rice, the heart and soul of the Japanese people. This world’s cuisine was more based on things like wheat and oats.

Later on, he would be struck with a different question: *Hmm. Now how should I get my hands on some umeboshi...?* But that was a different matter altogether. For now, his quest was to get his hands on more rice—and so he got busy sorting the divisions in his field.

*

“Hmm? Eggs? I haven’t really eaten that sort of luxury food very often...”

The next day, Zelos was out scouring the city for information, all with the aim of getting closer to his goal of tamago kake gohan.

The first person he’d gone to ask was Luceris, the apprentice priestess who’d been left in charge of managing a church. A priestess of the Faith of the Four Gods, specifically, she wore a white-colored priest’s robe—but even then, her breasts drew Zelos’s eye. Her long silver-blond hair, along with her gentle features, put her smack-dab in the middle of Zelos’s strike zone. *If I were twenty years younger*, he thought, *I would’ve liked to make a move on her.*

As a lover of big breasts, Zelos found Luceris’s body—which was quite unlike that of the average Japanese woman, and curvy in all the right places—to be incredibly stimulating. He viewed the Faith of the Four Gods as an enemy, but he could make an exception for breasts. Breasts were justice.

While he thought he could feel his heartbeat growing faster from time to time, he was able to restrain himself enough to avoid coming across as

suspicious, going through small talk before eventually reaching the crux of the matter. But now that he had, it was starting to sound like eggs were considered a luxury item here.

“Did you say ‘luxury food’? *Eggs*?”

“They’re very nutritional, and fresh eggs are far beyond the means of the common people. Occasionally, they were served as part of our meals when I was training at the abbey, but...even then, it was a luxury we were only given about once every two months.”

“They’re *that* rare? I was hoping to try and get my hands on some chickens, actually.”

“Well, they’re birds, but...”

A little confused by Luceris’s hesitant response, Zelos inquired further. “Is there some kind of problem?”

“The birds that lay eggs—the wild *coccos*—are apparently so ferocious that they’re impossible to handle, you know? I hear that even the people who raise them professionally come back covered in wounds every day after collecting the eggs...”

“Hmm. I wonder if they’re something like the birds used in cockfighting? Not sure exactly how ferocious they are either...”

“From what I’ve heard, their meat doesn’t taste very good, but their eggs are prized. I’ve also heard that the final form they’ve been seen to evolve into is the cockatrice. Nobody would even *think* of raising them at home.”

“That’s...a *monster*, right? Who’d choose to raise a monster in the first place?”

The line between monsters and animals was vague in this world. Generally, anything with a magic stone inside its body was considered to be a monster, but there were also some cases in which a magic stone could be found inside the body of something usually considered to be an animal.

Because of that, there was also the approach of using the term “monster” to refer to anything that brought harm to humans, and “animal” to refer to

anything that did not.

Ultimately, as living creatures, they were *all* inherently animals; it was just that humans had the irresistible urge to sort things and classify them. Even now, it was a fierce topic of debate between scholars. What was more, both monsters and animals had the ability to evolve—not as they did on Earth, but as individuals. And the ability for an individual specimen to change like that only made classifying things *more* difficult, creating yet *another* point on which opinions differed.

“That’s just how much demand there is for their eggs. Really, though, I’d advise you against getting involved with those things! I remember seeing poultry farmers carried into the abbey for healing almost every day...”

“It’s kind of hard for me to come to any decisions when I don’t know exactly how vicious they are. But...they *are* essentially chickens, yes?”

“Yes, they’re chickens.”

No matter how hard he tried, Zelos couldn’t get the idea of *Earth’s* chickens out of his head. It just didn’t match up with what he was hearing about their characteristics in this world.

As much as he tried to conjure up images of them being “vicious,” the most he could think of was a little chicken coming up from behind him and lightly pecking at him.

And if that was all it was, he couldn’t see what there was to be afraid of. It certainly didn’t seem like the sort of thing that should be injuring long lines of farmers, at least.

“I just can’t picture it. Have you seen those chickens yourself, Luceris?”

“I haven’t. I’ve at least heard that they’re large enough to hold with both arms, but...I’ve yet to actually see one in real life. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it; just hearing about them is plenty. Oh, by the way—do you know anywhere around here that I’d be able to mine for metals?”

“Mining? If I’m remembering correctly, I think there was supposed to be an abandoned mine about half a day north of Santor. One of my childhood friends

is a mercenary, so I've heard that mercenaries frequently go there to mine metals for strengthening their armor."

"Half a day to the north, hmm? Well, then...I wonder if I should get going now?"

"Now? It's going to be dark by the time you get there..."

Zelos *had* to make a dryer for his rice. It wouldn't do to finally get his hands on rice, only to have it sprout immediately after being harvested.

"I'll be fine. There aren't that many enemies out there that'd pose a threat to me."

"But I've heard that there are a lot of monsters around there..."

"I managed to survive for a week in the Far-Flung Green Depths. Do you really think I'd let the monsters around *here* take me out? If anything *did* attack me, I'd turn the tables on it without a problem."

Plus, I don't have enough metal to make that other thing I want either. Though the dryer will still be my top priority...

Having grown up in a culture centered around rice, Zelos yearned for a nice hot bowl of the stuff. He missed it sorely—and miso, and soy sauce...

"I'll try and head there now. I'll probably be back in two or three days, so don't worry too much."

"But I've heard the mine has all sorts of monsters in it! Of *course* I'll worry!"

"Anything that wanted to kill me would need to be at least on the level of a demon dragon king to stand a chance. Anyway, you know what they say—strike while the iron's hot. So I'll be off."

"Ah..."

Paying little heed to Luceris's worry, Zelos set out, his heart soaring.

Unaware of the full extent of Zelos's power, Luceris felt something like a stab of pain in her heart as she watched him leave.

The feeling confused her. "Wh-What *is* this? Why does my heart hurt?"

"I bet it's love!"

“Looks like you’ll be able to get married after all! Good for you, Sister!”

“Kinda worried for you since he’s an old guy, though...”

“Meeeeaaaat! I wanna eat meat!”

As Luceris turned around, she saw the orphans standing there being awfully precocious, smiling and giving her thumbs-ups.

Whether because of their environment or something else, they’d matured quicker than they should have.

“Whah— What are—?!”

“Mmm hmm. It’s your first love, isn’t it, Sister?”

“The flame of first love, lighting in Sister’s heart...”

“Can we use that flame to cook some meat? Cook it real nice and tasty?” The child began to drool.

While one of them was perhaps an odd one out, it seemed like the orphans were wishing Luceris luck in her romantic endeavors, more or less.

“I-It’s not like— I— It couldn’t be!”

“Ah! She bit her tongue! Sister’s getting embarrassed!”

“Love sneaks up before you know it. And then... *Whoosh!*”

“You gonna do *naughty* things with him, Sister?”

“How about meat things? Meat things would be good...”

The children continued to drive Luceris into a corner. They truly were little devils.

“C-Cut it *out!*”

“You embarrassed, Sister?”

“She’s embarrassed, isn’t she?”

“Heh. You know what they say: age is just a number, right?”

“Where’d you get those sunglasses from? And have you got any meat? I still really want to eat meat...”

Really, where *were* these kids learning all of these phrases? Rather than from where they lived, they were probably picking them up from hearing conversations between adults...but not many people in this old part of town had that kind of way with words.

Most of the adults around *here* were the type to speak in a more vulgar way. And given the influence that could have, it really wasn't the best place for raising children with good sensibilities. Wherever they'd gotten it from, though, it was enough to make Luceris angry. They were running now, the young woman hot on their heels.

While she wouldn't have agreed if you'd asked her, it looked like quite a fun time—and perhaps even a heartwarming one.

Chapter 10: The Old Guy Heads to an Abandoned Mine

If Zelos wanted to find his way to the abandoned mine, he'd need either a guide or some information.

And seeing as practically no enemies would stand a chance against him, he was leaning toward the latter option.

The problem was, that information would probably only be available at a handful of places. Specifically, either a shady tavern on the outskirts of town or the mercenaries' guild. Zelos wasn't a mercenary, so he decided to hold off on going to the guild and headed instead to a nearby tavern. But when he arrived, he found that while it *was* a shady-looking old tavern, it was absolutely packed with customers.

Taverns in this world provided cheap, regular meals at midday, and it was only when the sun set that they began to really operate as proper taverns. And for now, it was midday, so all sorts of merchants and crafters were gathered there, all ordering whatever food they felt like and chatting with their acquaintances. Among them were even merchants engaged in business discussions, and mercenaries trading items with each other.

Zelos had come here expecting the sort of tavern where gruff, vulgar men would gather, but it seemed more like a place for social gatherings between everyday people. It wasn't as if *all* of the clientele were mercenaries and merchants; there were even some people there with their families.

Hmm... Do I have to rethink my assumptions about this world, perhaps? I should probably hold back from trusting my light novel stereotypes too much. I thought it'd be like a bar in the Bronx or something, but there are a lot of regular people here too, aren't there?

Frankly, Zelos was nervous about coming to a tavern in the first place. While he might have *seemed* easygoing, he was a timid middle-aged man at heart. But

while just keeping himself holed up would allow him to stay out of trouble for the most part, he wouldn't be able to properly learn about the world's common sense if he did that. And seeing as he had to *live* in this world from now on, that simply wouldn't do.

What was common sense back on Earth wouldn't always apply here—and depending on whether or not he knew the common sense of *this* world, there would be differences in how he treated other people, and was treated by them. Knowing that kind of thing would be essential in business negotiations and information gathering, so it wasn't as if he could just stay a shut-in mage forever.

If he wanted to deal in things like magic stones, he'd need to put in the effort to blend into his environment.

But at the moment, he just looked to regular people like a rather suspicious individual.

I feel like a lot of people are looking at me... I wonder why? Don't tell me—am I about to get caught up in some sort of stereotypical "encounter at a tavern" thing?

Having gotten used to his own shady appearance by now, Zelos had forgotten just how shady he actually looked. Humans were good at adapting to their environment, but in Zelos's case, it was simply that he didn't pay enough attention to himself.

By the looks of things, the other patrons had been put on alert by the sudden appearance of a mage who hadn't been here before—but that wasn't the only reason. This tavern had a lot of mercenaries and the sort as regulars. They'd frequently end up working with people they didn't know at all, and their most common way of judging each other's abilities when they did was to look over their equipment.

Put simply, it was something people did to get themselves acquainted with talented individuals. If you had a strong ally with you, you were much less likely to end up dead.

And for that reason, it was common sense among those mercenaries to get straight to giving any new faces they saw around a simple once-over.

Well, then, if I want to get information, I can't just stand around all day. I guess I should take a seat and get to ordering something. The only question is, where to sit...

Zelos looked around for an empty seat, but they were all full; there was nowhere for him to sit. And as he stood there, looking helplessly around the tavern, his eyes came to rest on a certain individual.

It was a girl with pigtails and a fancy-looking dark-colored outfit that exposed a lot of her chest.

She looked less like a mage and more like a magical girl, her appearance somehow a mixture of charming and bizarre. It was the girl that Zelos had saved from bandits not long ago—the girl who was his fellow reincarnator.

She was also sitting with two other women. A good opportunity for getting some information, Zelos thought.

“Huh? Hey, it’s the old guy! Long time no see! *Munch, munch...*”

“Don’t you think it’s improper for a girl to greet someone with a mouthful of food? But yes, long time no see, Iris, and...what was the name? Sorry. If I recall, you were her companion named...”

“Lena. Thanks again for helping us out!”

“Oh, that’s right. Lena. Now I remember.”

The woman named Lena wore clothes that allowed for easy movement, topped with a leather vest. She looked like the sort of mercenary who fought at the front line.

She had a shortsword hanging from her side, further confirming the idea that she was focused on mobility.



With Iris and Lena was a woman with red hair and brown skin, glaring at Zelos with a sharp expression.

Judging from the breastplate she wore and the big longsword leaning against the table, Zelos assumed that she, too, was a frontline fighter but in charge of dealing big hits. She was taller than the average woman—and what was most important of all, at least for Zelos, were her sizable breasts. She had the tight proportions of a model, putting her perfectly in line with Zelos's preferences; the only problem would be the age gap between them.

"Hey, who's the old guy? You two know him?"

"Huh? Yeah. This is the guy who saved us recently when we got kidnapped by bandits."

"Doesn't he seem kinda shady? And I feel like he's staring at my breasts..."

"Is that really anything new for you? You've got a good body, so pretty much every guy ends up with their eyes glued to you."

"You're the same too, Lena, aren't you? Just how many guys have you turned down by now?"

"Who knows? I'm only interested in *younger* guys, anyway."

While Lena might have seemed decent at first glance, the truth was that she was less into "guys" and more into "boys."

"Do you mind if I share the table with you? With the place as crowded as it is, I've been struggling to find a place to sit."

"Hm? It's okay if it's you, I guess, but what brings you here today? I thought you said you were gonna hole yourself up and do farming stuff."

"I'm looking to gather some information for exactly that. Specifically, I was thinking of going to an abandoned mine up north. And grabbing a bit of a meal before I head out, I suppose."

"The abandoned mine? Forget it, old guy. That's not the sort of place a gray-robe should be messing around in."

"What's wrong with his robe? He's super strong, you know?"

It seemed like Iris still wasn't aware of how the hierarchy of mages worked in this world, and specifically in this country.

Around these parts, you could tell the strength of mages by looking at the color of their robes. Gray was reserved for the lowest-ranking mages, followed by black, then crimson, then white.

But neither Iris nor Zelos were from this country, so that logic didn't apply to them.

Zelos explained the basics of the system to Iris—and ordered some food while he was at it.

“Huh. But you'll be *more* than strong enough, won't you, Mister?”

“Who knows? I've never actually been there before, so I can't say anything for certain, but...is it really such a dangerous place?”

“We go there fairly often on escort requests from miners. Goblins are a given—and then there are things like kobolds, worms, and golems too. The worms are the biggest pain of the lot.”

“Hmm. But you *can* mine there, yes? Sounds perfect, then.”

“Were you even listening to me? And seriously, the place is like a labyrinth. It's dangerous to go there alone.”

As Zelos listened to Jeanne's warning, he sandwiched his order of something like fried chicken between some bread and shoved it into his mouth. It seemed like it had already been seasoned with herbs and the like. As he chewed, the delicious flavors of sweet chicken fat and fragrant herbs spread throughout his mouth—and together with the uniquely savory taste of the hard bread, they made for an immensely satisfying bite.

“I'm perfectly aware that it's dangerous. But I absolutely need some metal, no matter what. Which is why I was thinking of going there for some mining now.”

“Either you're real confident in yourself, or you're an idiot with a death wish. I'm not sure which. Not that it matters to me whether you live or die, though.”

“Well, we'll be going with him either way, right? It's better to have more allies, yeah? And he might be an old guy, but he's a *really strong* old guy.”

“You’ve got a point. Jeanne, you needed to get your sword reforged, didn’t you? And weren’t you saying it’d be cheaper if you could mine the metal yourself?”

“Ugh... Do we really have to take the old guy with us, though?”

Jeanne’s somewhat reluctant attitude seemed strange to Zelos.

But at the same time, a strange feeling was welling up from deep inside his heart.

It was the same feeling that welled up in him whenever he met Luceris, and it was something he’d never felt before back on Earth. Though if you had to describe it anyway, it was similar to how you felt upon seeing a magazine full of naked pictures of the opposite sex.

What is this sensation, I wonder...?

It had been a while now since he’d come to this world, but Zelos was still unable to understand the feeling.

“Well, if you could just show me the way there, I’d be happy to go off and act on my own after that. But it sounded like you needed some metal yourselves, did you?”

“Mmm hmm. Jeanne’s sword has just about had it, so we need some metal to strengthen it. Ideally some iron, or some black iron.”

“How about redgleam iron? I feel like that could make your sword tougher.”

“You can’t find it unless you go deeper in. The place is swarming with worms that far in, so you’d be putting your life on the line.”

“We’d be fine with *this* guy with us, though. How about we go mining together?”

Zelos gave it a bit of thought. He wanted metal, but he also felt like it’d be slightly embarrassing to accompany a party of young female adventurers. Still, if he wanted to get his hands on that metal, then joining up with them would be the most reliable option.

If he could just get to the mine, then he’d be fine to split off from them and act on his own from there. His main concern was trying to get there in the first

place, along roads he wasn't used to.

It wouldn't exactly be a problem for him if he were attacked by bandits or something along the way. However, his time being chased by monsters in the Far-Flung Green Depths had given him the belief that it could never hurt to have more allies.

"If all of you are fine with it, then I'd be happy to have you with me. It'd be night by the time we arrive, though. Would you be okay with sleeping outdoors?"

"Ah, no, there's a village just next to the mine, so that won't be a problem. It's a village called Arhaus, and—"

"Yes, a lovely little town I call *Arouse*. ≡ Sometimes I tag along with young boys going there to level up, and then..." Lena let out a quiet laugh.

"*You* might call it that, but its name is *Arhaus*!"

It seemed like there was approximately one person using this village for a rather *different* purpose.

When Lena kept quiet, she came across as a beauty. But now, in the midst of reminiscing, her face twisted into a perverted grin.

It felt like an incredible waste of potential.

Don't tell me—is she going after young boys who are just starting out as mercenaries? And if she is, then...wouldn't that be a crime? But I guess this is a different world, so maybe things here are different from what I'm used to. Aaaanyway...

Trying to view Lena's actions through the lens of crimes back on Earth led Zelos's train of thought on a bit of a tangent.

Despite *seeming* proper on the surface, Lena was actually a somewhat eccentric, perverted woman. She was apparently a bit of a player, and not in the same gallant way as a certain duke Zelos had come to know.

So why, he wondered, weren't her actions being treated as crimes?

"I'd be fine either way, but if there's some kind of lodging to sleep at, then that's good. I *am* a man, after all, and if there's a charming young lady sleeping

in the same room as me, I'd be worried about needing to hold myself back. So if we can sleep somewhere proper, that'd give me some peace of mind."

"Charming ladies? You mean...me?"

"No, I'm not interested in kids. Anyone who *does* see kids that way is a criminal, in my opinion."

"Oh? Are you talking about me, perhaps?"

"If not for your creepy laugh just earlier, you would've been nicely in my strike zone. What a shame..."

That only left one option—Jeanne. Her body stiffened, overcome with surprise.

Two gazes came to rest on her.

"Ch-Charming? What, you meant *me*?!"

"By the process of elimination, yes, that would be what I was saying. Didn't you realize it? You're plenty attractive."

"Wh-*What*?!"

Jeanne's face had flushed a deep red, and she was getting more and more flustered. Honestly, she was looking rather cute.

Zelos, on the other hand, didn't seem flustered in the slightest. He just went back to chewing on his lunch with a nonchalant expression.

Perhaps it was another vestige of his time during the global financial crisis.

"Wh-Why's the old guy such a playboy?!"

"C'mon, it's fine, isn't it? He said you were attractive, right? Must be nice, being pretty like that..."

"Right~? But he got grossed out by me. All I did was mention having a bit of fun with some boys..."

"Leaving Iris aside, *I* think what you're doing's a crime as well, Lena."

Oh. So it is a crime. I was starting to doubt my common sense for a second there...

It seemed like the women of this party all had strong personalities in one way or another.

But Zelos didn't want to make any waves if he didn't have to. He just sat there quietly, continuing to eat.

After all, if he stayed quiet, it was likely that Zelos's remarks to Jeanne would be played off as a joke.

"I-I don't wanna! I don't *wanna* go along with an old guy like this..."

"The more helping hands we've got, the better. Just give up already, okay?"

"Yeah! We're not going to find anyone else as strong as him, so you can put up with it for just a couple of days!"

"I. Don't. Wannnnnaaaa!"

It looked like Jeanne wasn't good with men. Being rejected so openly and straightforwardly made Zelos a little sad, in a way.

Eventually, Iris and Lena managed to convince Jeanne, and she begrudgingly agreed to let Zelos tag along. But she still ended up glaring at him perpetually, her eyes wary.

All he'd done was compliment her by calling her attractive, and apparently she'd been convinced that he was here to try and hit on her.

Regardless, the party, having finished their meal, set off straight for the abandoned mine—albeit with Jeanne still throwing a tantrum right up until the last moment.

*

It's often said traveling is all about who you're with. But after three hours of walking, the party had stopped speaking altogether.

The women had been so lively as to be called noisy at first, but now, they were walking along the path in silence.

The road they were traveling was a simple highway consisting of land that had been roughly leveled out, stretching through a forest that never seemed to change as far as the eye could see.

It was about half a day's walk to the village of Arhaus. But a whole half a day on foot still made for quite the distance.

Timewise, it was about six hours, specifically. It was also known as a safe path, devoid of monsters.

In a sense, you could say everything was going according to plan. But when there was *this* little happening, it could be incredibly boring. Unable to endure the silence any longer, Iris spoke up.

"Hey, Mister? What do you want to mine that metal for anyway? You want to make some new armor or something?"

"I was thinking of making something like a little silo for keeping rice in. One with a dryer built in. All just made by myself, of course."

"Rice?! There's rice here?!"

"Sure is! Look, you're standing next to some right now. See? That's rice."

Iris pulled out the "weed"—a rice seedling—growing by her feet, and scrunched her face up in doubt.

"Is this seriously rice? I used Appraisal on it, but it's just calling it a weed..."

"It's rice. It's just that in this world, rice is so low down in the hierarchy that it's seen as being a weed. Which is a real waste, if you ask me."

Iris's Appraisal skill was only at a low level. It seemed like even if she used it on the plant, all it told her was that it was some kind of weed.

"Without a senba-koki, harvesting it would be a lot of manual labor. But then I figured, if I *am* going to make some kind of tool, I may as well go all the way and make a pedal-based threshing machine. I know there are tools like hoes and spades here, but...how do they thresh their wheat, I wonder?"

"What's a senba-koki?"

The senba-koki was an old-fashioned Japanese predecessor to the machines used for threshing rice; you'd use it by pulling the rice plant in between the teeth of the tool's comblike shape. A pedal-based threshing machine, meanwhile, had a drum with countless wires sticking out of it rotating inside a cylinder, and you'd step down on a pedal with your foot to operate a belt that

in turn made the drum rotate. Sticking the rice in the gap between the drum and the cylinder then allowed you to thresh the rice.

It was more efficient than the senba-koki, and used up until about the middle of the twentieth century. Nowadays, though, combine harvesters were the norm, serving to do everything from harvesting the rice to threshing it all at once. Early combine harvesters were operated by hand, harvesting the rice plants wherever you maneuvered the caterpillar tracks to, and you had to leave a sufficient gap between rows for the tracks. But still, you could harvest all of the rice without needing to use a sickle, so things were nonetheless far easier than how they used to be. Technological progress could have tremendous effects on life.

“Why not just make a combine harvester, then?”

“I thought about it, but if someone wanted to, they could turn it into a tank, you know? If you made it bigger and loaded some sort of big ballista on it, it’d probably be able to rival...well, maybe not a dragon, but probably a wyvern, I’d think.”

“Wouldn’t that be a *good* thing? Think of all the people you could protect with it!”

“Have you forgotten? Human history is the history of conflict. What’s to say that someone wouldn’t take a convenient tool and use it to hurt people in war? I don’t know about you, but I’d reeeeeaaaally rather not be father to some huge war.”

“Ugh. You’re right. I remember hearing that even TV antennas were turned into battleship radars...”

“Oh, you know your stuff! By the way, it was a Japanese person that made those!”

Bringing unnecessary technology into the world could change warfare forever.

If you put your mind to it, this world would allow you to make a rail gun using magic alone—and in fact, Zelos himself was capable of using such a spell. And if he simplified it and provided it to regular soldiers, he wouldn’t be sparking just

a *war*; it was liable to turn into an all-out genocide. With that in mind, Zelos had decided to put some limits on how he used his cheat-like knowledge.

Most of all, he simply didn't want his name to go down in history as responsible for a genocide—as the creator of a weapon of mass destruction.

His motto, after all, was that “a quiet life's a good life”; and that was the life he wanted to lead, without being tied down by any responsibilities. Well, he'd still have the responsibility of paying taxes, at least, but that was no different to what he was used to from modern society.

“By the way, weren't you a private tutor last time I saw you? Are you unemployed now?”

“Ugh, I was hoping you wouldn't ask...but yes. I'm unemployed. I wonder how Celestina's going right about now...?”

There were about another three hours of walking left until the sun set. Zelos looked upward, to the perfectly clear sky overhead.

Somewhere out there, below this same vast sky, was the same girl he'd been teaching magic up until just six days ago.

She'd been called useless for all of her life—and Zelos was curious, just a little, about how she was getting on now.

*

Delthasis von Solistia, Duke of Solistia, was a perpetually busy man, both privately and publicly.

At home, he was happily married to two wives, each from a different noble lineage. In business, he was engaged in commerce not as the duke but as a private man, giving him a revenue that far outstripped that of other nobles. And as duke, he invested tax money into all sorts of projects to improve the lives of the citizens, brought all of those projects to success, and returned the proceeds to the people, driving rapid growth in the duchy.

That local development *did* bring massive profits to Delthasis's own business, Solistia Trading, which he was engaged in as something of a hobby. But that meant that whatever money he used for himself, he earned from his private

business; he didn't spend a single gol of tax money on himself. And his reliable business skills, along with the name of his company, had earned him quite a lot of trust from others in the industry.

Outside of that, Delthasis belonged to his family's own faction of mages—the Solistia faction, which advocated for better relations between the Order of Mages and the Order of Knights. At first glance, it looked like a weak little faction. But in reality, it had such financial might behind it that it was difficult for anyone to lay its hands on. Even those finances were impervious to attack, which left the other mage factions unable to meddle in the Solistia faction's affairs.

The Solistia faction had been established via a proclamation from the former duke, Creston, due to his worries about the future of the country. The noble mages from the other factions, of course, saw it as a threat to their own power and authority. Yet even then, those mages were unable to carelessly go up against Delthasis.

Creston had been brothers with the previous king. So Delthasis, too, had been born with the right of succession.

Even if the nobles against Delthasis *did* somehow manage to kill him off through some sort of dastardly plot, the factions hostile to the Solistia faction—filled as they were with noble mages who hated him—would immediately become the primary suspects. And at any rate, the Solistia faction was affiliated with the royal faction formally recognized by the government, and was greatly trusted by the king.

At one point, Delthasis had been the subject of countless rumors which held that he was aiming to usurp the throne for himself. And while those rumors *had* bothered Delthasis, he had simply responded by abdicating his right to the throne. Essentially, he'd turned the tables on those trying to besmirch his reputation, using the opportunity to prove his loyalty to the current royals. He'd never been even the slightest bit interested in the position of monarch to begin with.

For his foes, it was harder to imagine a bigger thorn in their sides. The man was burning with the ambition and zeal to protect both the territory he

controlled and the company he chaired—and today, as on most other days, he sat at the desk in his office, working diligently to file what looked like an endless mountain of documents.

“Hmm. Looks like the spell scrolls are selling well. It seems being both cheap and reliable has given them a good reputation. Even the mercenaries don’t even appear to be considering the other factions’ scrolls now.”

Creston voiced his agreement. “Indeed—things seem to be going swimmingly. Those we’re up against get their money from spell scrolls and potions. And I imagine their sales of spell scrolls will have taken quite the hit now, yes?”

“That they have. After all, once you buy a regular spell scroll, it can be used as many times as you want. Nobody needs to go out and buy the same spell a second time. It only makes sense that they’re struggling.”

“On the other hand, the spell scrolls *we’re* selling...”

“Yes. I suppose I should’ve expected as much from a Sage, but to think he’d be able to build that little feature into them...”

Solistia Trading had recently started carrying new spell scrolls—and they were selling rather well.

Much of that success came down to a special feature of the scrolls. As Delthasis had just said, conventional scrolls could be used as many times as you wanted once you’d purchased them, allowing you to reuse the scroll to teach somebody else. It was such a problem that the leading mage factions had been hesitant to sell scrolls in the first place.

Whoever bought a scroll could simply pass it onto the next person, and so on and so forth, so countless people could learn a spell from just one scroll. But of course, that wasn’t exactly good for business—and so the factions struggled to get decent sales of their spells. Worse, the magic paper that the spells were written down onto was ridiculously expensive, making it virtually impossible to stay out of the red.

But none of that applied to the new scrolls being sold by Solistia Trading. They were based on spells that Zelos had rewritten, and he’d worked in a magic erasure formula that meant that as soon as a spell was learned from a scroll,

the spell's formula would disappear from the scroll—including the erasure formula that had been incorporated into it.

The valuable magic paper could then be recycled on the spot; the company could simply write a new magic formula down on it and sell it as a spell scroll once again. In other words, all the company was selling was the spells themselves. It could recover the expensive magic paper, helping it to avoid running at a loss.

The business model also created a proper balance of supply and demand, especially with flocks of customers rushing in to buy the efficient new spells. And by pushing its customers to learn the spell on the spot, inside the store, the company could prevent the magic paper from ever leaving the premises, making it even easier to recycle.

As things stood, Solistia Trading was selling its spell scrolls so quickly that it couldn't mass-produce them fast enough; by now, the spells were garnering quite the reputation for their effectiveness. Spell scrolls were becoming a promising new business for the company, and it was running itself ragged trying to recruit more mages to produce them. It all represented a major blow against the larger factions. And the mages of the Solistia faction were exhilarated by the opportunity to do business too; it was all upsides.

Previously, no matter how much effort mages had put into producing spell scrolls, it had been hard to improve sales for them. But now, the scrolls were being ranked based on the spell's power, with higher ranks translating to higher prices—and suddenly, business seemed a lot more viable. Furthermore, since Zelos's little tweak prevented the scrolls from being reused, more and more customers were coming to buy them directly from the company. It was all a complete turnaround from how the spell scroll industry used to look, and it was making for a quite successful business.

In addition, since learning more powerful magic required higher levels, mercenaries could be expected to redouble their efforts toward improving their skills. In doing so, they'd put in more work to fight off monsters that threatened society—and once they *were* able to buy and learn that powerful magic, they'd become even stronger, allowing them to serve in that role all the better in the future. So the system was helping make society safer as well.

Essentially, it was a positive feedback loop between profits and public security. A convenient situation for all involved.

Another upside of that was that any complaints from the other factions could be dismissed by pointing to the positive effects on public safety. Really, it was hard to think of a more perfect plan—all while placing financial pressure on the other factions.

“So many of them keep coming to pester me for money; it’s becoming a pain. Even the budget for the academy has its limits. They can’t simply expect me to keep handing them more.”

“We will need to bolster our influence before they realize what we’re playing at. And ideally, I would like to strike a further blow to their pockets. I would like to have us mass-produce potions, and yet...”

“Hmm. Potions, you say? We *do* have alchemists within the duchy. Not enough, though.”

“The real problem is that some of them are better than others. Even if we were to ask them all to make the same basic healing potion, some would be more or less effective depending on each alchemist’s abilities. We have no need for third-rate alchemists.”

“No—I say we gather up the third-rate ones as well. Hire them all en masse, and have them all produce the same fifth-and fourth-rank healing potions. Any who *do* prove themselves to have talent can be tasked with creating third-rank and higher potions.”

Delthasis’s thinking was something like this: if there were significant discrepancies in ability levels even among the third-rate alchemists, he could just have each of them make the best healing potion they could, then mix all those potions together to create a single substance of uniform quality.

There were different ranks of healing potion, starting with fifth-rank—the weakest—and going up, with each rank requiring more materials than the last. And by having a group of alchemists for each rank, and mixing together the output of each group, it would be possible to offer a product of uniform quality for each rank. Doing so would also allow the company to set a uniform *price* for potions of each rank. Potions of the same rank were all made using the same

ingredients anyway—and if the active ingredients were the same, no harm would come from mixing the potions together. It was a bit of a rough way of going about things, but it would result in far higher demand than trying to buy only potions from the best alchemists and sell them.

After all, while those higher-level healing potions produced by the most talented individuals could have big effects, they came with downsides. It would only be possible to produce so many of them, placing limits on supply, and the need for more materials meant that prices would need to be higher as well, making it harder for most people to buy them.

So from a business perspective, it made more sense to sell mass-produced healing potions of consistent quality, rather than high-level, artisanal potions that worked better but were difficult to obtain.

“What do you propose we do about those alchemists who *are* second-rate or better? Do you intend to have them create the same lower-rank healing potions as well?”

“No. I’ll still have them produce high-quality potions, in line with their talents. I hear a number of alchemists who’ve graduated the academy are struggling to find work and get by, so I expect they’ll be rather happy to come and join us.”

“Is it possible that any of the other factions could hide a spy among them? One looking to steal our trade secrets and sell them?”

“I’ve prepared for that already. Specifically, it seems like the underworld will be willing to lend us a hand. From what I understand, they’ve been badly burned by our foes before, so I imagine they’ll be looking for revenge.”

The mage factions—specifically, the Wiesler and Saint-Germain factions—could be rather troublesome.

The Saint-Germain faction was focused on research, so as long as the Solistia faction put forth a good enough moral argument, they’d probably be able to reach an agreement.

The Wiesler faction, however, had been increasingly running wild for a few decades now. Rumor had it that the faction was even connected to some kind of dark organization, and it left a never-ending parade of suspicious deaths in its

wake.

They also held a particularly arrogant attitude toward the common people. They'd become so full of themselves that they often openly boasted about their supposed superiority.

"But that arrogance ends now. With Saint-Germain's control of the potion market, I wouldn't be surprised if Wiesler tries to threaten other nobles into giving them loans."

"Indeed; they've been up to no good for a while now. Regardless, I expect we'll face a counterattack soon."

"Yes—though I'm maneuvering to deal with that. I intend to *crush* them financially. Is that acceptable to you, Father?"

"I care not. Hit them as hard as you wish; let us rid the country of those foolish excuses for vassals."

The Wiesler faction was currently trying to win over the Order of Knights by bribing influential nobles to bolster their own influence. It wasn't as if the other factions were innocent of that sort of thing, but the Wiesler faction was just on a different level with how forward it was about it.

Besides, when the Saint-Germain faction did such things, it was just trying to procure research funds, and the other smaller factions were just swept up in the two major ones, used essentially as their gofers.

Of course, it wasn't as if those smaller factions were happy with that state of affairs. So if another powerful faction emerged, they'd undoubtedly be happy to switch their allegiances in an instant.

"I've reached out to Zweit as well. The only problem left now is..."

"To get Mr. Zelos working with us as well, correct? Teaching us to decipher magic letters?"

"Yes—that's probably the best way of strengthening our faction."

"Do you suppose he will accept our request?"

"We have options for convincing him. Either we can promise to keep his private life safe, or..."

“Don’t even *consider* forcing him into the spotlight. Making an enemy of him could mean disaster for this entire country.”

Aside from Celestina and Zweit, Zelos was the only one capable of deciphering magic letters.

If Zelos were to write a book detailing his method for deciphering them, and make it available for Creston’s faction to use, the faction’s study of magic would advance by leaps and bounds. It would also allow the faction to raise more talented mages—which would help in eliminating the corrupt factions that currently ruled mage society.

Creston and Delthasis cared for their country—and because of that, they wanted to put an end to the current situation, even if that meant taking extreme measures. After all, if they didn’t knock the other factions down a peg, and fast, those factions would probably continue to grow more and more arrogant until they eventually launched a coup d’état.

The corruption among those factions had also given mages a bad reputation among the common people. That reputation threatened to drive the entire country into a slump—and the only way to prevent that would be to expel those who were giving mages a bad name in the first place.

“I do wonder... Will Tina and Zweit be able to act as the beacons of our little revolution?”

“They should be able to, now that Zweit’s changed. He was rotten before.”

“If you knew, then why did you not *do* anything about it? I have no proof, but I rather suspect he was the victim of some sort of mind-altering magic...”

“People only grow by learning from their failures. And it seems his meeting with Mr. Zelos has changed him significantly.”

“The problem now is Croesus, is it not? Who knows how *that* one will go...”

Creston seemed to be racking his brains over each of his grandchildren. He was massaging his temples as if he were struggling through a headache.

“Well, it’s about time. I’ll be heading out soon.”

“Hmm? Got some more business to attend to, are you?”

“There’s a lovely lady waiting for me. I’m just about to go and see her.”

Creston let out a sigh. “You truly are devoted to your ways, Del. You’ll wind up killed by one of these women someday, I’m telling you.”

“I’d welcome it with open arms. Being killed by a good woman would only make me all the more glad to have been born a man, Father.”

A true gentleman was capable of managing his work right down to the second.

And now, having finished that work, Delthasis stood, preparing to go and see his latest lover.

As the duke donned his coat and walked off into the distance, Creston murmured to himself: “Just how many grandchildren do I have by now...?”

Truly, his son’s behavior baffled him to no end. Apparently being a “true gentleman” meant bewildering your own father as well.

Left alone in the office, Creston wondered whether he had made some serious mistakes in raising his son.

It was sometimes said that no child could ever really understand what was going on in their parents’ minds. But here, it seemed, the opposite was true: Creston had no idea what his son was thinking.

Chapter 11: The Old Guy Meddles in Someone Else's Business

When Zelos and the others arrived at the village of Arhaus, the sun was beginning to set. It was too late to head for the mine, so they stayed the night in a reasonably priced inn.

Then the next morning, as they were eating breakfast, an innocent question from Iris sparked a flame.

Specifically, she asked, “Hey, Mister, what kind of place is the Far-Flung Green Depths, anyway? All I’ve heard from the mercenaries’ guild is that it’s terrible, but what’s it actually *like*?”

Zelos didn’t really want to talk about it all that much. But at the same time, he’d gotten to know Iris, and he didn’t want her to head there herself out of curiosity and wind up dead. He figured that if he told her in advance how dangerous it was, she’d avoid being so reckless—so he sighed, clasped his hands together on top of the table, and began to answer her question.

To teach her about the dangers of the Far-Flung Green Depths.

To call up a terrifying memory that he’d hoped to forget.

*

It was the fifth day after Zelos’s reincarnation. It was night, and he was breathing heavily as he ran through the forest.

The whole place was teeming with monsters looking to eat him. To them, he looked like nothing but a scrumptious meal.

“Ugh... How long am I gonna have to keep this up for?! Just what have I gotta do to get out of this damned forest?”

The stress had knocked Zelos out of his usual manner of speaking and made him revert to how he had spoken in his younger years. And his expression, while awfully haggard, had a fearsome glare to it, like some sort of beast. He was a

man on the brink.

The woods around Zelos were filled with monsters that would pounce on him if he left even the slightest opening. As such, he had to stay vigilant at all times, even while he was eating and sleeping—and it was all placing an increasing burden on his mind. Given no time to even rest, he simply fought and fought, taking part in a never-ending banquet of slaughter as he mowed down one enemy after another.

The monsters themselves weren't all that strong, at least for him. The problem was that every time he killed one, another would be lured in by the scent of blood, and attack him when it arrived. Between the large monsters that generally came alone and the smaller ones that came in packs, there was a constant rush of foes, and it was wearing Zelos down badly.

Zelos was using a brief break in combat to catch his breath. But he was still unable to let down his guard, and continued to keep an eye on his surroundings. After all, the slightest bit of carelessness could cost him his life.

Suddenly, his senses alerted him to a presence from behind. He ran.

THWOOSH!

In an instant, a gaping wound was carved into the ground. It was clearly an attack from someone or something, but Zelos couldn't see what.

He pushed all of his senses into overdrive and scanned the area for movement.

Something's there. And I know it's looking at me. But...where is it?

Zelos couldn't see the enemy. But it was certain that there was some sort of predator there, targeting him.

Beasts wouldn't usually challenge strong foes—but if that foe was weakened, it was a different story. That was a law of nature in this dog-eat-dog world. If you couldn't kill and eat prey, you wouldn't be able to live; that was the default state of nature.

Zelos didn't know what kind of monster his opponent here was, but one thing was clear: it had the ability to keep itself hidden.

“The problem is, what type is it? Is it optical camouflage, or some sort of mental confusion...?”

Optical camouflage worked by using mana to manipulate the moisture in the air so that it reflected light, preventing those around the user from seeing them. Mental confusion, meanwhile, saw the user send a special sort of wavelength toward their target to make their senses play tricks on them, preventing the prey from recognizing the predator.

Since Zelos had felt the presence of an attack coming, though, it wasn't the latter. So he determined it was highly likely to be optical camouflage.

Now, he felt that presence again. Moving on instinct, he jumped high, and used wires to hook onto the branch of a large tree that must have been hundreds of years old. Again—at the very spot where he had just stood—the earth was scored with deep slashes.

The scars had obviously come from some kind of slashing attack. But this time, Zelos was able to get a confirmation on his foe, albeit just barely.

Specifically, it was something like a distortion in space—but it was enough for Zelos to infer that whatever he was up against, it was large. The fact that no *other* monsters were attacking him at the same time probably also meant that they'd been scared off by whatever monster was attacking him now.

“Fly, Divine Hunter's Arrow!”

In an instant, the dust in the area coalesced, forming an arrow that could pierce even steel, and flew off toward the distortion.

KSHAAAAGH!

It seemed like the monster was in pain. The arrow had probably pierced through its back—but because Zelos was unable to see it, he couldn't get confirmation of the wound. Now, however, the distortion in space was wavering. The optical camouflage had been dispelled—and a giant praying mantis appeared.

Its appearance was repulsive in the extreme. It sported a black exoskeleton, bizarrely long sickle-like arms, and long thick legs that supported its massive body. Its sharp claws gouged into the earth, and its compound eyes gleamed

crimson.

“A death mantis...”

While it had been a relatively simple enemy to defeat in *Swords & Sorceries*, the one that stood before Zelos now seemed stronger. Part of it was that its level was higher, but the main issue was that its body was significantly different from the death mantises that Zelos knew.

Its body was covered in countless sharp spikes, serving to protect it from would-be attackers.

“Is this an evolution? Or maybe a subspecies? Either way, it looks annoying to deal with... Also, I thought insects weren’t supposed to feel pain?”

Zelos would have had a valid point...*if* he’d been on Earth. But this was another world. There was an altogether separate notion of common sense here, and the one Zelos knew from back on Earth wouldn’t always apply. One way or another, the fact was that he had to defeat this monster...but monsters armored with a shell or exoskeleton, including insects, made for difficult opponents. They were able to pour mana into that already-hard armor to further boost their defense, so you had to fight them by infusing your own weapons with mana to offset that boosted defense.

While they were a simple enough enemy to defeat if you did that, Zelos still didn’t know the size of the forest he was stuck in, so he wanted to avoid using up his mana if possible. However huge his mana reserves were, they weren’t limitless.

And in an environment as harsh as this one, mana—the ability to cast magic—was a lifeline. It simply wouldn’t do for him to use it up with abandon.

Zelos accelerated his movement as he headed toward the death mantis’s torso. Perceiving his movements, the death mantis swung the sickle on its arm toward him with terrifying speed. But that was exactly what Zelos had been waiting for.

The monster’s size was also its weakness: it made large wide swings when it attacked. And while it was fast, it wasn’t as if Zelos couldn’t intercept it.

“You’re mine!”

Zelos's shortsword sank into the joint connecting to the monster's sickle arm. It was his usual style: crippling the enemy's ability to fight back.

With that in mind, he had decided to aim for the huge sickle. And with his slash, the sickle went flying off into the air, then pierced the ground as it landed.

Faster than he could even confirm the damage from his first blow, Zelos ran, using the swords he held in each hand to instantly cut through the monster's weakest joints, one after another.

With two simultaneous attacks to the same spot, the monster's leg was cut to shreds.

Right away, Zelos did the same thing again, and repeated it until all of the monster's limbs were chopped off. The death mantis collapsed to the ground—and for the finishing blow, he sent its head flying. Truly, it was over in a flash.

Zelos made quick work of dismantling the death mantis's corpse, hurrying to store its parts away in his inventory. And once that was done, he broke into a run through the forest. He wanted to get away from there as quickly as possible. After all, the next monsters would probably be here soon.

Monsters were sensitive to the scent of blood. And this was an accursed forest, where powerful monsters were crowded together wherever you looked.

It was hell; you'd defeat one monster, only for a different one to attack you barely a moment later. Speaking of which...

VVVVVVVV...

A low, bass sound echoed in Zelos's ears. The sound of fluttering wings. Zelos turned toward the direction of the sound—and that was when he saw *it*.

It was the ultimate creature, its body covered with a shiny black shell. An insect that had already been hard enough to kill back on Earth, where it had survived unchanged since ancient times. And here, it was huge.

"A-A great givleon..."

It was an enemy that Zelos wanted even *less* to do with than the crazy ape—and it was flying at an impressive speed.

The great givleon landed on the ground with a boom. It was far larger than the death mantis, and it was the strongest insect-type monster around.

It was using both its feelers and its compound eyes to scan the area for food. And then, it found Zelos...

ZZZZZZZZ!

It was coming straight for Zelos now, at incredible speed. Frankly speaking, it just looked *disturbing*. And as it came for him, getting closer and closer, it knocked up a mighty storm of dirt, and felled trees in its path. Zelos was filled with all sorts of terror.

“NO! Oh, my god! Help! *HELP ME!*”

The sheer revulsion that Zelos felt had made him forget how to speak Japanese—he’d screamed for help in *English*. The Great Sage might have been scared of gays, but cockroaches weren’t any better.

In fact, if there was anyone out there who actively *liked* cockroaches, they’d probably do well to get a job in biology.

“Why?! Why are *cockroaches* the only things that have to be the same as on Eeeeeaaarth?!”

Even the praying mantis had had those vicious spikes protruding out of its body, giving it a visibly different appearance from the ones back on Earth. But the cockroach, and the cockroach alone, looked exactly the same as what Zelos was used to. What was more, that vile creature, which had survived since ancient times without needing to change its form, had apparently become as massive as a dinosaur in this world. On Earth, at least they were small enough that you could kill them with a good hit from a slipper...but this thing was a solid ten meters long. A slipper wasn’t going to cut it. It seemed to be incredibly powerful too.

Worse, Zelos’s Appraisal skill refused to work on the thing for some reason, so he couldn’t even view its status. It was like this whole string of unfortunate events had been put together just to harass him.

This was the turning point at which Zelos began to truly loathe the goddesses who had brought him to this world.

Zelos fled, and the great givleon gave chase. It had turned into an utterly terrifying game of tag—a game that would continue until early morning. The middle-aged man’s screams echoed endlessly throughout the vast forest.

Ironically, that game of tag played a big role in bringing Zelos closer to the highway—though that wasn’t something he was aware of. As much as he hated the cockroach, it had actually done him quite a nice favor.

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“So that’s what happened. Hmm... Not feeling well, are you?”

All three women in the mercenary party accompanying Zelos—Iris, Lena, and Jeanne—were slumped over the table, lifeless.

Each was reacting in their own way. There was one “No... Please no cockroaches...”; one “A giant cockroach monster? I hope I never have to encounter *that*”; and one just silently trembling in fear. They were still at the breakfast table, and having heard Zelos’s tale from the Far-Flung Green Depths, the three of them were now having simultaneous mental breakdowns from envisioning the image of a giant cockroach.

“Well, Mister, it...certainly sounds like you had a big adventure, one way or the other, huh?”

“I’m amazed you were able to make it out of there alive, Zelos. The monsters in the Far-Flung Green Depths are so fearsome that nobody even goes near it...”

“You’re one thing, if you actually managed to beat monsters from a place like that...but a giant cockroach?! Just...*no!*”

The largest great givleon that had ever been sighted before had been five meters in size.

There had never been any reports of one so massive it could fell tall trees; even after they heard about it now, it felt hard to imagine how terrifying it must be in person. Especially when it sounded like it was both fast-moving and protected by a tough exoskeleton.

The bigger an insect was, the thicker its exoskeleton. And at that size, you wouldn’t stand a chance at damaging it unless you had siege weapons.

If you got attacked by such a ridiculous monster, even running away would be difficult.

Still, the women were terrified less by its power and more by the fact that it was a *giant cockroach*. And Zelos felt the same way.

“Anyway, shouldn’t you all be finishing up your breakfast sooner rather than later? We’ve got a mine to get to.”

“Easy to say that...”

“After hearing about a huge cockroach? My appetite’s kind of...”

Jeanne was just trembling silently again.

Now that they’d imagined it, the women couldn’t stop their trains of thought.

That huge, grotesque body kept appearing in their minds, robbing them of all their appetites.

“If *that’s* enough to make you lose your appetite, how do you expect to cut it as mercenaries? You’ll have to fight other humans to the death sometimes, right? Whether they’re bandits, or robbers, or maybe even fellow mercenaries.”

“Come on, Mister, could you not say such nasty stuff? We only go after *monsters*.”

“She’s right. I wouldn’t be able to fight against other humans. Even if they were evil.”

“Which is exactly why the two of you got caught, isn’t it? If you can’t bring yourselves to kill enemies who want to harm you, how do you expect to stay alive? Aren’t mercenaries all about being responsible for themselves? Dying like *that* would make you nothing more than a laughingstock.”

It seemed like Iris and Lena had never killed anybody. So they’d hesitated—and ended up getting caught by the bandits.

But in this world, where life was cheap, that sort of naive mindset would get you killed.

“Well, I suppose there’s something positive to be said for the fact that you aren’t the kind of people who can kill others with smiles on your faces. But you

should probably be prepared to *have* to kill somebody at some point.”

“I’ve killed before, but it definitely wasn’t something I enjoyed.”

“Anyone who *does* enjoy killing people has something wrong with their head. If you meet someone like that, stay well away.”

Jeanne had killed bandits before, but it seemed like she still wasn’t fond of the idea of murder.

If you were a mercenary, you’d very likely come up against criminals sooner or later—and engaging in murder would be forgiven, if it was for self-defense. If you died yourself in the process, it was on you—which was part of why Zelos found the mercenary trade to be such an unpleasant one.

“If you aren’t going to eat any more, why not just get them to package up the leftovers in a bento and take them with us?”

“Oh! Right!”

“A ‘bento’? What are you talking about?”

“It’s not a word I’ve heard before either. Iris seems to know what it is, though.”

Bentos—packed lunches generally, for that matter—weren’t a thing in this world. Most working people lived in the middle of towns, and there were a lot of crafters who worked from home as well. Even if they couldn’t make their own food, they’d find plenty of places to eat if they just went out into town.

Plus, there were street vendors and the like as well, so people usually just didn’t need to make bentos to bring with them.

“Think of something like putting some lightly seasoned, smoked meats or vegetables in bread, then wrapping it all up in paper to let you carry it around. Unless it’s a particularly hot time of year, you don’t have to worry about the food going bad either.”

“That makes sense. Iris carries our luggage for us, anyway...”

“Sounds like a good idea! Iris, can you?”

“Okay~! I’ll go ask the old guy from the inn, then.”

Iris headed into the kitchen, her steps light. The owner of this inn in Arhaus served as its head chef as well; it was a little establishment, light on staff.

“By the way, what sort of materials do you get from a death mantis? Can you use them for making equipment?”

“They’re well suited for making weapons and armor, yes,” Zelos replied. “Both light and sturdy. Weak against fire magic, though.”

“Well, they *are* bugs, I guess. Makes sense they’d be weak against fire.”

“The meat from inside the exoskeleton was delicious too. It sort of tasted something like...crab? Shrimp?”

With that one line from Zelos, it felt like the air had gone still. Lena’s and Jeanne’s expressions froze over.

“Y-You ate it? You *ate* a death mantis...?”

“It’s a monster! Are you insane?!”

“You say that, but I know people eat meat from certain species of orcs and things. And it was kind of tasty, you know? Most importantly, when you’re surviving day-to-day, and your top priority is to secure food, you should eat anything you can get your hands on, as long as it’s not poisonous.”

“I-I *suppose*... But it’s a giant bug!”

“Right?! It’s not the kind of thing you’d usually think to eat, yeah? I know I never could, at least!”

“If you’re going to be like that, you might end up starving to death in a critical situation. Sometimes living can be its own battle, you know? No, more than a battle; it can be a *war*...”

His eyes! His eyes are scaring me...

I know he’s been through some crap, but he’s seriously looking kinda insane right now! Okay, I’ve decided—I’m never going into that damn forest...

Even back on Earth, Zelos had eaten preserved grasshoppers on the regular. And because of that, he didn’t feel much resistance to the idea of eating bugs. Cockroaches were still a step too far for him, though.

One way or another, he'd caused Lena and Jeanne to question whether a death mantis was really all that different from the monsters that they sometimes ate themselves—and the two of them had ended up spiraling down that train of thought, lost in contemplating the differences between monsters and insects.

“Okay, he said we can take the rest with us in a bento!” Then, a pause, followed by: “Wait, what happened?”

“Are we actually in the wrong here? But, no, they're *bugs*...”

“No bugs! I don't wanna eat bugs! But orcs are monsters too, so...what's even the difference anymore?”

Iris had just gotten back, and she tilted her head, confused by what was going on.

Next to her two near-catatonic party members was Zelos, lighting a cigarette and taking a quick puff to round off his meal. A ring of cigarette smoke floated away, slowly, quietly, over the two women's heads.

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Three tall mountains towered over the village of Arhaus from behind.

One of those mountains held the mine that Zelos and the others were headed to. It had once been a bustling destination, full of determined miners looking to strike it rich with gold.

One day, however, monsters had appeared there en masse, chasing the miners out. More than two hundred years had passed since then—and now, the only people who went there were mercenaries looking either to level up or to mine ore for reinforcing their gear. The money they spent on accommodation, and on food from the local street stalls, provided the village with an income.

Still, the village's lifestyle could hardly be called opulent, and sometimes it had to pay some big cleanup expenses when the occasional mercenary got violent and wreaked havoc. So in a sense, the village was in a precarious situation.

“There sure are a lot of people here, aren't there?” mused Zelos. “I wonder if

they're all mercenaries."

Jeanne replied, "Well, defeating monsters helps you level up—and that's important for us mercenaries, since we've always gotta put our lives on the line. They probably wanna get stuff for their own gear too. You can get metal here, and it's not like miners can head out and get it themselves without an escort."

"Hmm. But there are a lot of thuggish sorts around as well, from the looks of it. Look, like just over there..."

As the party cast their gazes over, they saw a beginner mercenary who seemed to be a young boy surrounded by a group of middle-aged mercenary men. From the looks of it, the men were pretty clearly small fry—but they were stronger than the boy, if nothing else.

"It's fine! Bet ya can't even use it properly anyway! C'mon, I'll put it to use instead."

"This is a keepsake from my dad! I'm not giving it to anyone!"

"Pretty sure yer old man would've wanted a veteran like me to make use of it anyway, not some little runt like you!"

"You didn't know my dad! Don't just make things up about him!"

"I'm an expert. I know these things. I can tell this thing was used by someone half decent before; it's wasted on a brat like you."

The man was clearly picking a fight with the kid, trying to cheat him out of his sword. And his companions were letting out nasty laughs, making fun of the boy. There were other mercenaries around as well, but none of them seemed to be trying to save him.

"Ah. So there *are* those sorts around. Stereotypical idiots doing their thing..."

"Do you think you'll be able to deal with them, Mister?"

"Why are you pushing it onto *me*? If it bothers you so much, go and step in yourself."

"Is that really the sort of thing a proper adult should be saying, Zelos?"

"I like to keep my life nice and uneventful. I'm not the type to go sticking my

neck into every little quarrel I see.”

“Some adult you are.”

Everyone in the party was gazing coldly at Zelos now.

As far as he was concerned, he just didn’t want to create any grudges—but it seemed like that wasn’t going to fly with his companions. And as he was considering his options, the situation escalated.

“How many times are you gonna make me ask? Hand it *over*!”

“H-Hey! Give it back! Please, give it back to me!”

The man had seized an opening and stolen the boy’s sword right from its scabbard.

And as he did, Zelos’s Appraisal skill activated without him wanting it to.

*

Mithril Sword (Deteriorated)

Originally an incredible sword forged by a famous dwarven blacksmith, this sword now has a cracked blade. Likely still usable for a while against weaker monsters, but almost at the end of its life. So damaged that it barely even holds up as a sword anymore.

Likely needs to be remade, but doing so would require a large amount of material, and therefore some considerable costs. Its durability has fallen enough that a single blow from a powerful monster would be enough to shatter it.

*

Why does it have to activate like that when I don’t need it? This thing really annoys me sometimes...

Zelos was getting peeved by his skill just activating on its own when he didn’t even want it to. A sigh came out of his mouth, and he grumbled to himself.

“Heh heh heh... Got us a nice sword here!”

“G-Give it back! That’s my dad’s!”

“Shut up! It’s too good for a brat like you. I’ll put it to good use, don’t ya worry.”

The man hit the boy, sending him flying. The nasty mercenaries looked pleased with themselves.

“Ah... Sorry to interrupt right when you’re enjoying stealing someone else’s sword. Just thought I’d tell you—that thing’s almost useless at this point, you know?”

“Huh? The hell is your problem?”

“No, don’t get me wrong; I’m not too bothered about what happens to other people. But that sword there’s already pretty beaten up, you see. If you keep using it, you’ll end up dead sooner rather than later. Not that I’d mind that.”

The rough men shared looks with each other.

“D-Don’t you try and fucking pull one over on us!”

“If there’s some water around, I’d be able to prove it to you, but I’m under no obligation to go that far. It’s just, I’ve got the Appraisal skill, so I happened to notice it and thought I’d warn you.”

Appraisal let you see certain information about things, depending on how high your level in it was. Those “things” could be humans as well; it was possible to even see someone else’s level. Though in actuality, looking at someone else’s status screen was illegal.

“It’s up to you whether you believe me or not. Well, *you’d* be the one dying; it’s not *my* life at stake, so I don’t care all that much at the end of the day.”

“Wh—” The man paused. “Ya serious?”

“You’ll have to figure that out for yourselves. It’s like I already told you: whether you believe me or not is up to you. This is as far as I go.”

The mage who’d shown up in front of the mercenary looked awfully shady; it seemed highly likely that he was lying. But on the chance that the mage *was*

telling the truth, this sword might end up getting the mercenary killed. The man was wavering between two decisions...and as he did, he saw the swords hanging by Zelos's sides. A *third* option had appeared.

From what the mercenary could tell, the man before him was a slovenly mage of medium build, about the same age he was. It didn't at all seem like he was capable of handling a sword—and most of all, he was wearing a gray robe. The mercenary let out a sleazy laugh and made an offer.

"How 'bout I trade it to ya for yer own swords, then?"

"I don't need it. I'm happy with what I've already got."

"This thing's made of *mithril*, man! Wouldn't it be better than what ya got?"

"You're a stubborn one, aren't you? I don't need a sword that's just about to break. Try someone else."

The mercenary had intended to negotiate, but he'd been shut down completely. Worse, the man had turned him down on the basis of the mithril sword being defective, so it was looking more and more likely that the thing really *was* no good. But looking at the swords of the mage in front of him, the man figured that his opponent was, after all, only a mage. It seemed like it'd be easy to just take the things by brute force. He licked his lips obscenely.

"Yer a mage, yeah? So ya don't really *need* those things, do ya? I'll take 'em off yer hands for—?!"

The man wasn't able to finish his sentence. After all, before he could, the tip of a sword was right at his throat. In fact, it had pricked just barely into his throat, leaving a red dot.

"I *can* use my swords, actually. In fact, I might even be *better* at this kind of thing. So? Do you want to die? I won't get in any trouble for turning the tables on a mercenary gone rogue, so there's no need for me to hold back. How do you want to do this? If you want to take me on, I'd be happy to oblige. Just be aware: you *will* die."

"Eeeep!"

"What the... When'd he even draw that sword...?"

“He tricked us! This asshole’s no mage!”

Zelos had drawn his sword so fast that the man didn’t even know when it had happened. The man’s mercenary companions realized that the opponent they were up against was quite skilled; he wasn’t the kind of foe they’d stand a chance against.

And what that meant was that this gray-robed stranger effectively had their lives in his hands.

“You’re not even that skilled; don’t go obsessing over good weapons. What are you, children? If you rely on your weapons that much, you’ll be third-rates forever; or do you not even realize that? Honestly, if you’re that eager to go and die, it doesn’t bother me in the slightest—but if you can’t judge how strong your opponents are *here*, I don’t think you’re going to live too long either way. In fact, you might be even worse than third-rate. Do you want to just die here and get it out of the way?”

The shady-looking mage had transformed into a master of the blade in an instant.

He was speaking in a low, threatening tone, freezing the men’s hearts with fear. He didn’t have any bloodlust to him, but if he felt like it, he could absolutely kill them.

And the reality of that sent the men falling down into a pit of indescribable terror.

“The thing is, you see...I’m kind of pissed. I just came here to do some mining, and I’ve gotten dragged into having to deal with you scumbags. Do you get what I’m saying?”

Generally, the sort of lowlifes who would try to lay their hands on a novice mercenary like the boy here didn’t actually have all that much talent to back it up.

Judging then that they were unlikely to defy an actually powerful opponent, Zelos had tried to threaten them a little bit—and it seemed like he’d been right. Still, the occasional scumbag would ignore the gap in power and try to come at him with a knife or something; those were usually the nastiest of the lot. And

because of that possibility, Zelos had to be thorough if he wanted to ensure that no harm came to any bystanders.

“I— Uh— My bad! I got carried away...”

“As long as you understand. Now, can you hurry up, give back the sword, and get out of my sight already? If I happen to see you loitering around in front of me again, then...”

“Then... Then what?”

“Then I’ll treat you to a little holiday. It’ll only be a one-way ticket, mind you... Heh heh.”

Faced with the mage and his eerily calm laughter, the mercenaries all threw down their swords and ran away.

They’d tried to guess at their opponent’s strength—and this time, they’d guessed wrong. It was little more than inertia and force of habit that had kept them going as mercenaries over the years; they were hardly the kind of men to take on an opponent stronger than they were.

If nothing else, it seemed that they excelled at running away, sprinting off into the distance as fast as their legs would take them.

Exasperated at the stereotypical turn of events, Zelos lit another cigarette and took a puff.

“My lord. Are there a *lot* of those kinds of hooligans out there?”

All of a sudden, Zelos was back to looking like just another slovenly middle-aged man. It was as if his menacing attitude from moments ago had vanished in a puff of smoke.

The young boy walked up to him.

“U-Um... Thank you.”

“Mmm... Don’t worry about it. No need to thank me or anything. I was kind of forced to step in anyway...”

“No, really... This is a keepsake from my dad, so I’m so, so thankful.”

“Seriously, it’s fine. You just got lucky today; that’s all it is. There’s no telling

how things will turn out for you tomorrow—that's how life is for mercenaries."

The boy looked a little feminine, and gave off the impression of being well educated. Yet at the same time, his eyes seemed to burn with a strong resolve. It was a similar story for his equipment too: while at first glance it seemed like the sort of thing you could find being sold anywhere, it was actually made from high-quality materials. In short, he wasn't the kind that you'd usually expect to be working as a mercenary.

Jeez... Looks like this one's got a lot of spirit to him too, huh? And I'd probably feel like crap if I just left him like this and ended up hearing that he died because of that sword. There's no other way about it—I guess I'll have to meddle some more...

Zelos had somehow taken a liking to the kid. He took out a sheet of paper from his inventory and spread it out on the ground. The paper contained a technique for advanced alchemy—a transmutation sigil.

"Hand me your sword for a minute. I'll try to repair it a little."

"Huh? But it's almost about to—"

"About to break, yes. That's why you came here, isn't it? To get materials for a new sword? But the sword you've got there might not even last until then. Again, all I'll be doing is repairing it *a little*—please keep in mind that I'm really just extending its life span by a short amount of time."

"A-Are you really willing to do that for me? And how are you going to—?"

"Just wait and see. Well, with a mix of steel and mithril, it might be hard to tell exactly what's going on at a glance... Anyway, I'm just sticking my nose where it doesn't belong here, so again, just consider yourself lucky today. Really, I'm just doing this on a whim, okay? Usually I'd charge for this."

"I understand. I really appreciate it!"

Zelos took the mithril sword and placed it on the center of the sigil. He poured mana in to activate the sigil's formula, and the sword began to float. A semitransparent panel appeared in midair, and detailed information about the status of the sword was projected in Zelos's mind via his Appraisal skill.

“Hmm... So it’s forty-five percent steel, twenty-three percent damascus, and thirty-two percent mithril. Honestly, I...wish I could’ve seen it back when it wasn’t so damaged.”

As he checked over the sword’s information, Zelos hammered away at his magical control panel to mend the visible cracks in the blade. And once the effect of his repair formula was complete, he muttered a single word: *“Transmute.”*

As a former programmer, Zelos was fast at this kind of work. A dense magic formula spun and shimmered within the sigil he’d deployed, carrying out the orders he gave it. At first glance, it might’ve looked like a complete repair would be possible; but ultimately, this method could only be used for rough repairs, something like first aid. Parts that had already been broken once before couldn’t be fully repaired to their original state.

Having quickly finished the task, Zelos took another puff of his cigarette and breathed out a cloud of smoke.

“It’s done. But again, this is just to tide you over until you can get a new sword. If you trust it too much and keep using it for a long time, you’ll die, okay? Please be careful.”

“Th-Thank you. I don’t plan on using this sword too much anyway—I already intended to get my own sword, for myself.”

“Then you should be fine, I guess. Well, it should at least be better than your average steel sword around here for now. It shouldn’t break *too* soon. Oh, but I guess it might depend on the enemy you’re up against...”

“That’ll be enough. I’ll be able to go and mine some iron now. Really, thank you so much.”

Watching as the boy walked away in high spirits, Zelos muttered, “Ah, to be young...”

As he packed up the sigil and put it away in his inventory, he felt cold glares from his three companions piercing into his body.

“Why are you looking at me like I’m a piece of rubbish?”

“Mister... I thought you said you weren’t interested in kids?”

“You work faster than I’d thought. Putting the moves on the kid with a kind act like that...”

“I *knew* you were a playboy! So you *are* after me too...”

Zelos didn’t understand what they were getting at. All he’d done was meddle in the boy’s affairs.

He was sure he hadn’t done anything to invite this level of scorn.

“So you like the boyish type, huh, Mister?”

“Jeanne’s kind of masculine too. So that *is* your preference, then, hmm?”

Jeanne herself just trembled at the thought, not saying a word.

Zelos hesitated to respond, confused. “Wha—?”

Then, finally, he reached a conclusion. The kid he’d thought was a boy had, in fact, been a girl.

“Sh-She was a girl?!”

“Wait, Mister—you didn’t realize?”

“There’s no way there’d be such a cute boy out— Actually, no, there *are* some, sometimes. Eheh heh heh... Really, though, she was a girl, however you looked at her!”

“I can’t believe this geezer. And you, Lena—your face is creeping me out. Are you remembering something?”

All Zelos had done was show the kid a little bit of kindness, and somehow it had caused the women to treat him with more disdain than before.

It was unreasonable.

“Wait a minute. Tell me, Lena—you say you see cute boys around sometimes, but what do you *do* to them?”

“What, you ask? Oh, I just... Geheh. Eheh heh heh...≡”

Whatever she was recalling, her usually beautiful face had twisted into something that looked simply depraved.

She was clearly a failure as a person—and more than that, she was scary.

“Look—between me, who just mistook a girl for a boy, and *her*, who’s actually laid her *hands* on boys, who’s worse here?”

Iris and Jeanne responded together, their voices harmonizing perfectly: “You’re *both* the worst!” They really *were* being unreasonable, though.

To think, they thought he was on the same level as *Lena*... It just didn’t seem fair to him.

“I can’t entirely accept what you’re saying, but...anyway, let’s get to mining. Well, I wouldn’t mind going alone, if you don’t want to join.”

“Hmph. Changing the topic, Mister? You really *are* the worst.”

“He really is. How about we just split up here? I dunno *what* he’d try and do to me in the dark...”

Ignoring their harsh remarks, Zelos headed toward the entrance of the mine.

He could tell, by now, that whatever he tried to say on the topic, it’d be pointless. So he simply changed tracks, and got straight to stepping into the mine filled with monsters. Behind him was Lena, continuing to let out a perverse laugh and wriggle her body as she walked...but the others had all decided to ignore her.

Apparently she was still in the middle of remembering things, and frankly, even just looking at her made them feel gross.

Most of the time, she was a perfectly normal person; but her sexual preferences were rather unfortunate, to say the least. Hoping to avoid anyone thinking they were with her, the others kept a set distance away from her as they headed farther down into the mines, each of them with their own goals in mind...

Chapter 12: The Old Guy Enters an Abandoned Mine

Surprisingly, the inside of the abandoned mine wasn't dark at all. Some of the ore glowed: a blue-tinged light illuminated the interior, shining all the way along the mine shaft.

You could sometimes hear the echoes of steel clanging against steel—probably from people fighting farther in. But the noise never lasted long.

Zelos's group had split up into a vanguard and a rear guard to avoid getting hit by each other's attacks in the narrow tunnel. Zelos had been placed in the vanguard—which gave the party a battle formation of Zelos and Jeanne in the vanguard, and Lena and Iris in the rear guard. That wasn't a problem in and of itself, but the main reason he'd been put there was because Jeanne had said she couldn't stand the idea of Zelos sexually harassing her from behind.

Lena was tasked with protecting Iris. She did, after all, have a shield. She was the perfect woman for the job.

Or at least, that *would* have been the case, if she weren't still lost in her memories with that creepy smile plastered across her face...

Zelos sighed. "Is she really going to be okay?"

"Ah, yeah, she'll be fine, old guy. It's nothing new."

"Wait—she's *always* like this? I wouldn't be surprised if she got reported for looking like that..."

"It's already happened. Honestly, I'm thinking I might wanna seriously reconsider working with her from now on."

Is it just me, or does it look like she's gone past reminiscing at this point and just moved right into some sort of depraved fantasizing? Well, she kind of scares me, so I'd rather not call out to her to check.

Lena continued to grin ecstatically and wriggle her body about, and the few muttered words Zelos overheard sounded kind of suspicious. It didn't exactly

seem like the best time to try to talk to her. If Zelos had actively *tried* to make out what she was saying, he probably would've been able to at least get the gist of it...but assuming that it was likely something criminal, he decided not to. There were some things in the world that you were better off not knowing.

“She’ll snap out of it if a monster pops up. I’d recommend just ignoring her.”

“I’m not sure I *can*. Especially when she’s like *that*...”

“Yeah. I mean, I said that, but I’m seriously hoping a monster pops out right about now.”

Jeanne had made it abundantly clear that unless the situation changed, Lena could go on like this forever.

Zelos didn’t even know what to say. And then, suddenly, he stopped walking.

His Scouting skill had alerted him to something—and as he focused more closely on the tunnel ahead, he felt some sort of presence. Skills like this worked on intuition, so it wasn’t as if Zelos had an image or something come into his mind. It was more that he could just *feel* it—and prompted by that feeling, Zelos held his breath and looked around.

“What is it, geezer?”

“Something’s there. More than one, but I don’t know exactly how many. Kobolds, maybe?”

“Lena! Snap out of it! We’ve got company!”

“Hwuh?! Where’d my beautiful boy go?! I swear I had him tied down to that bed with ropes, so he must— Wait. Where am I?”

Wh-What the hell was she doing in that fantasy of hers? Just fantasizing about this stuff already makes her seem like enough of a criminal; please don’t tell me she’s actually doing it in real life as well! And did she seriously just say “tied down”?

It seemed like Lena had all sorts of dangerous thoughts running through her head. Part of Zelos wanted to ask, but another part told him that he really, really shouldn’t. In the worst-case scenario, he could wind up being seen as an accomplice.

For now, he pulled himself together and refocused on the path ahead. He could see the shadows now of whatever was coming at them—and each seemed to have the head of an animal, so they probably *were* kobolds. Kobolds had somewhat canine heads, giving them an excellent sense of smell. There was no doubt that they'd noticed the group and been preparing for an attack. More to the point, the ones coming from up ahead were probably just scouts; it wouldn't be unlikely for there to be more groups lurking behind Zelos and the others.

"Hmm. Do you think we should make the first move?" asked Zelos.

"You know if there are any behind us?" Jeanne shot back. "If there aren't, I'll charge in, but..."

"Who's the lowest level here?"

Iris put in, "Mmm... Lena and Jeanne, I guess? They're both about Level 50."

"You know, Iris," said Lena, "revealing someone else's level *is* a crime."

Iris was Level 237; as a fellow reincarnator, it made sense that she'd have a higher level. That meant it would be essential for her party to bring the two other lower-level members up to par going forward.

"I'll stop them from moving, so I'd like you two to defeat them, please. It'll help you level up."

"What about their magic stones? You really okay with us taking them? Whoever kills a monster gets the stone. That's how mercenaries do things."

"That's fine by me. I've got more than I could ever use anyway."

Zelos already had a massive inventory of magic stones from the time he'd spent surviving in the Far-Flung Green Depths. He had no interest in gathering more at this point. If anything, he could collapse the market for them if he got careless and sold off too many at once.

And since he didn't exactly *want* to crash the economy, he didn't intend on selling his stock for now.

"All right, then—let's get them! Jeanne, you go first, and I'll follow you up, okay?"

“Gotcha. Just don’t whine at me if I take all the kills before you get there!”

“As if I would! Anyway, make sure you don’t hit me with that sword of yours, please!”

“The hell do you think I am?!”

Their attack plan settled, things got moving all at once.

“*Paralysis Zone!*”

A sphere of light flew out from Zelos’s left hand, shooting ahead down the mine shaft. Before long, a shout came back—*grah!*—and Jeanne and Lena set off at a run. It didn’t take long after that for the kobolds’ shouts of surprise to turn into screams of demise.

Zelos and Iris walked up to join them, keeping their guards up as they advanced. And when they arrived, they saw countless mangled kobold corpses strewn across the battlefield.

Jeanne and Lena were carving open the kobolds’ torsos and taking out the magic stones embedded within. It was a task that was colloquially referred to as skinning.

“I’ve seen it a bunch of times now, but it still looks horrible...”

“Really? I’ve actually gotten used to it at this point.” Zelos simply took a puff of a cigarette and continued to walk along.

Iris was baffled. “How do you get used to *that*? Something must be wrong with you, Mister.”

“Well, I was already hunting wild boar and butchering them back on Earth. I guess that’s the difference between us.”

“Who *does* that nowadays? I just don’t get how you can live like that...”

“Bear paws have a lot of gelatin in them, you know? They’re actually pretty tasty. Plenty of collagen too, so I’d bet they’re good for your skin as well.”

“Don’t talk about it like you’re just talking about pig feet or something! Whatever it is, if I can still see the shape of it, there’s no way I’d be able to eat it. It’d just gross me out.”

The mention of pig feet reminded Zelos of chiraga, or a smoked pig's face.

Damn, I want to eat some chiraga right now. I love that chewy texture. It's the perfect snack to go with beer—honestly, I'd even be happy with just some mimiga. But most of the alcohol here's just wine; they've got ale too, but it tastes too fruity to me. It's just wrong somehow, you know? I think ale was like the original form of beer or something, wasn't it? I wish they'd at least serve it nice and cold...

Zelos longed for an izakaya. The closest thing this world had to beer was ale, which back on Earth had eventually evolved into beer. But they didn't even serve it cold, so it was hard to enjoy drinking it in summer. To a man who'd been raised in modern society, and come to appreciate how delicious beer could be, some warm ale wasn't enough to satisfy him. So he'd been wishing for an ice-cold beer for a while now.

"Guess I'll make a fridge too. The problem is whether or not they sell the ale in small enough casks to fit... Hopefully they're selling it in bottles, at least?"

"A fridge? What, are you gonna use what you know to remake some technology here, Mister?"

"Absolutely not. I'm only making it to use *myself*—I don't need a bunch of greedy good-for-nothings following me around and trying to get one off me. That's the last thing I want, señorita."

"So you're just gonna hog it all to yourself? No fair!"

"Of course I am. I don't want to cause any waves here."

Or so he said...but he'd already kick-started a revolution in the field of magic. It was a bit late for that attitude now.

Zelos wanted a normal life, but his idea of "normal" was somehow *off* compared to other people's. Still, it wasn't all that uncommon for people to just live entirely by their own values and fail to see the merit in things that didn't interest them. Values one person might think were universal might be considered absurd from another person's perspective. And Zelos was a good example—the fact that he preferred to consider himself unemployed rather than simply calling himself a farmer was proof that his values were already

weird in some way or another.

“Anyway, shall we get to scouting? It looks like we don’t have any more enemies in the immediate area. Though if we assume that the kobolds from earlier were just a scouting party, I’m guessing there are going to be more farther in.”

“I’m... I’m kinda bored. Like, you just get them all! There’s nothing for me to do!”

“Well, it comes down to the level gap. My skill levels are higher too; I’m pretty confident I’d be safe even if I was wandering around here alone, you know? Even the small fry from that forest I was in would be able to beat the monsters here. I feel like whatever I come across in here, I could probably just kill it in one lazy hit.”

Iris pouted. “Why’d *you* get such strong cheat powers! It’s not faaaaiiir!”

Zelos understood that perfectly well. And that was a big part of why he wanted to live a peaceful life.

As he was chatting with Iris, Jeanne and Lena finished recovering magic stones from the kobold bodies. But it was clear from their expressions that they weren’t happy.

“These stones are too damn small. They’re not gonna be good enough for making a sword. Guess we’ll have to get some more.”

“Well, they’ll give us a bit of money on the side, but...it doesn’t look like they’re the best quality, does it?”

“What are you going to do about the kobold corpses? Do you want me to burn them for you?”

“Nah, I think we can just leave them like that. They’ll probably disappear by the time we get back here.”

A pause. Followed by: “What?”

What Jeanne had just said didn’t make sense.

“Hold on a second,” said Zelos. “They *disappear*? Why?”

Jeanne replied, “Don’t ask me. I don’t know, maybe some other monsters come and eat them or something?”

“No, that can’t be it. Are worms common around these parts?”

Lena chimed in: “From what I’ve heard, the worms only appear farther in. The layers near the surface are all just kobolds. Apparently giant ants come out as you get deeper, though.”

“What monsters are meant to be cleaning up the corpses here, then? The ecosystem just doesn’t add up.”

Monsters were just another type of living creature. And the norm for any creatures in nature was a food chain—the strong attacked the weak for food, while the weak tried to nab a small share of the spoils from the strong. But for some reason, it seemed like that food chain wasn’t operating in this mine.

Going by what Jeanne and Lena were saying, it sounded like the mine was split into different layers, each filled with monsters that lived there and constantly fought any mercenaries that came through.

But if there was no food chain, the monsters down here should have inevitably gone extinct. It all sounded absurd.

“There’s something else I want to ask. Does each layer here have different types of monsters living in it?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Giant ants start appearing from the third layer down; then, starting with the fifth layer, there are megaspiders and mount scorpions.”

“None of that makes the food chain add up any mo— Wait. Don’t tell me...”

“Oh! I’ve got it! This mine must’ve been turned into a dungeon, right?”

“That’s what I’m thinking, yes. To a dungeon, both monsters and mercenaries are nothing more than food. Whichever side wins out and survives, it can feed on the other.”

A dungeon was *itself* a type of monster—one that took the form of a whole area. Dungeons were created when the mana density in a given area exceeded a certain threshold.

More specifically, mana running through the land could condense to form a

dungeon core, which would then turn the land in the surrounding area into its own body. From there, the dungeon would lure opposing forces inside itself and subsist on them as food when they died. Inside, the dungeon refined ores, precious metals, gems, and more, luring in humans to fight against the monsters within.

Then, when any living creatures died inside, the dungeon would absorb the resulting spirits and flesh alike, turning them into mana of its own—mana that would then be used to expand the size of the dungeon, and summon more monsters. Though for whatever reason, the magic stones weren't absorbed when that happened.

The dungeon didn't really act with intent; it simply constructed areas where living beings could fight, die, and leave behind the mana needed to sustain its body. Essentially, being inside a dungeon meant being inside the stomach of an enormous monster.

Still, you could get some high-quality mineral resources from inside, and they'd sell for a good price. There was good reason for humans to brave a dungeon's depths.

What was more, the weapons and armor of any mercenaries who lost their lives in the dungeon would remain where they fell—and sometimes, they'd be altered by the mana inside the dungeon, turning them into powerful equipment. Many mercenaries sought to conquer dungeons, looking to claim this equipment for themselves. But such equipment was often carried by powerful monsters, and some of those monsters were even sapient.

The monsters were supplied with mana from the dungeon, so they never went hungry—and in turn, they were able to multiply without limit.

If there got to be too many monsters inside, the dungeon would eject some of them, restoring a certain level of balance.

This phenomenon was known as a stampede, and it meant that cities and villages in close proximity to dungeons were always on high alert.

The core of a dungeon was always moving around, making it hard to pinpoint its location. And while they might have looked like delectable treasure troves to humans, they were also dangerous places where you'd be putting your life on

the line. The mercenaries' guild constantly monitored their status, and would help other commerce-related guilds to manage the surrounding areas. Sometimes, that could lead to the formation of massive cities around them.

Currently, society was aware of the existence of three dungeons—but all of them were low-level ones, filled with comparatively weak monsters. If this mine *was* another dungeon, there would be a good chance for the village of Arhaus to develop into a city. At the same time, however, it would come with a lot of hassle. The mercenaries' guild, which always held to the tenet of self-responsibility, would keep an eye on the dungeon, but it wouldn't go as far as to concern itself with the behavior of each and every mercenary. And with the possibility of a stampede, the current state of the mine was a concern as well.

"I read in a book that dungeons aren't the sort of thing you can find all that easily," Zelos mused. "And while they hold a lot of promise, they hold even *more* trouble."

"Like what? You know, don't you? Give me an example!" said Iris.

"Well, unless the dungeon's conquered, there's no way of knowing just how much the monsters in the deepest layer are multiplying. If things go badly, the monsters from the bottom could make their way up to the higher layers, and potentially outside the dungeon."

Lena broke in with, "Huh? Hold on, Zelos. Is this mine really a dungeon? Is there going to be a stampede?"

"It's still only a possibility for now. It might warrant going down to the bottom layer to find out, though..."

It was as if the air froze. The women in the party couldn't even understand what Zelos was saying.

"Ah—I'd be going down there by myself of course. Jeez, what a pain this has turned out to be..."

"Are you insane, you geezer?! If it's a dungeon, the bottom layer's gonna be *full* of high-level monsters!"

"Why are you treating this like it's just some little annoyance?!"

“Hmm? I mean, I just came here to do some mining, and now I’m finding out it might be a dungeon, you know? I’ll need to go down to the lower layers anyway to do the mining I’m here for, and apparently it’ll be swarming with monsters the whole time... It’s going to end up like when I was in the forest, isn’t it? A whole carnival of monsters... Ugh.”

“Are you seriously intending to *investigate a potential dungeon* just ‘while you’re here’ for mining?! Something’s wrong with your head. What’re you gonna do if it actually *is* a dungeon?!”

“If it gets too bad, I’ll run. I value my life.”

Jeanne and Lena spoke at once: “If you valued your life, you wouldn’t be doing something so dangerous!”

Harsh.

“Anyway,” Zelos continued, “I’ll take a quick look at the lower levels once I’ve got some ore. If it’s packed full of monsters, then...”

“Then what?”

“Then I’ll slaughter them.”

It was the return of “the Zelos from back then.” His aim was to live a peaceful life—but if there was a dungeon here that could spit out an army of threats to that peaceful life at any moment, he was prepared to go back to being one of the Destroyers.

While Zelos wasn’t fond of having such a chuunibyou nickname, he was more than willing to become a Destroyer for the purpose of eliminating anything that threatened his dream of a quiet life. And that was doubly true for monsters: his time spent surviving in the forest had given him something of a grudge. Whether in the Far-Flung Green Depths or a dungeon, he was entirely ready to go berserk on some monsters again.

“Remember to hold back, okay, Mister? It’d be so bad if this whole place just collapsed.”

“I’ll try my best. It’ll depend on what I’m up against, though.”

“You’re not going to be able to get through to monsters with words—you

know that, right, Zelos?”

“Iris, why aren’t you stopping him?”

“I mean, he’s an old guy, but he’s like the ultimate *overpowered* old guy. If there *is* something out there that can beat him, I kinda want to see it.”

Iris knew that if Zelos really did have the same stats as his *Swords & Sorceries* character, nothing in this world would stand a chance against him. Back in the game, his bizarre party had slain raid-class monsters with just five players; turned the tables on countless attempted gankers, leaving them with some serious trauma; and created some insanely powerful equipment.

To veteran players, the Destroyers had been a source of fear. But among newbies, they had become popular—something to be looked up to.

A big reason for that was that they were friendly to new players. If they came across a player who was just dipping their toes into the world of virtual reality for the first time, they’d give a kind, thorough explanation of the game’s basics to that player, helping them out until they reached a certain level. It was something they did as a kind of volunteer work; they would protect those new players from gankers and help them get used to things about the game, the type of things you wouldn’t learn just from playing the tutorial.

In reality, the Destroyers also had a second hidden reason for helping out: their *real* goal was to lure out the other veteran players and engage in “ganker hunting,” which was a little game they’d started up on a whim. Essentially, they were using the newbies as bait to draw out gankers looking to kill them, with the intent of then absolutely crushing any that appeared. Though at some point, the volunteering system they’d started up became independent of the Destroyers, with other guilds getting involved too and turning it into a large-scale activity.

As the ones who’d started the whole volunteering thing, the Destroyers weren’t able to just abandon it halfway, so they’d ended up needing to at least put in a continued token effort.

And because of that, they’d met with increasing popularity among newbies who weren’t aware of the whole story.

Iris herself could remember being helped out by those volunteers when she first started playing the game.

Unfortunately, the one who'd helped her back then wasn't Zelos—but the fact remained he was one of the Destroyers whom she'd so admired, and he was leading the way here with her now.

"Come on! Let's start mining! There's no point worrying about him."

"Iris... Is Zelos really *that* strong?"

"Yup. That's probably why he's trying to keep a low profile, I think. It'd be a pain to end up famous, right?"

"What'd be so bad about it? Even I wanna get better as a mercenary and end up famous, y'know? It'd help you get bigger jobs."

Iris replied, "I heard someone say something once: 'Someone who gets too strong only has two options. Either you're loved, or you're feared.' Well, something like that. Anyway, I think Zelos is the latter."

Lena and Jeanne looked at each other. They just couldn't bring themselves to believe that the man in front of them—casually smoking a cigarette and walking off ahead as if he were going on just an average stroll—was such an amazing person. But they decided to trust that he was, indeed, the kind of person that Iris said he was.

The two of them didn't know anything yet about the Destroyers.

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Farther along the mine shaft, a wide space opened up.

Zelos had used an arcana to summon a familiar to scout the area ahead. It had found that there was a rocky incline ahead of them—and that above that incline, there was another tunnel filled with kobolds lying in wait with bows. There weren't that many kobolds, but if the party got attacked by bows from above, they could die immediately, depending on where they got hit. Still, the area was wider than the tunnel they were coming from—so Jeanne, who had been using a shortsword to fight against the kobolds so far, prepared her longsword. She sheathed her shortsword and handed it over to Iris.

Lena said, “I suppose there aren’t too many of them because of all the mercenaries that come here?”

“There are still archers, though! They’re bad news. We don’t want to let them hit us.”

“You want me to cast Air Protection, then?” asked Iris. “It should be able to keep you safe from arrows for a bit.”

“Fortunately, there are only archers on one side. There’s no need for you to back her up with magic, Iris. I’ll clean them up myself.”

The three women cried, “Huh?!”

Zelos didn’t seem worried at all about an ambush. He advanced along the tunnel, light on his feet.

When the kobolds saw Zelos, they howled—signaling that they had spotted an enemy.

And Zelos, as if he’d been waiting for that, responded by launching himself into the air and darting about. He was using his flight spell, Shadowraven’s Wings.

The kobolds, who’d been preparing their bows, were thrown into a panic. Zelos capitalized on the opportunity, throwing a dagger at one kobold’s head.

The kobold died in an instant—and Zelos pulled on a wire that he’d attached to the dagger earlier to pull it back to his hand. Then he closed the gap to another kobold at rapid speed.

This second kobold had already nocked an arrow, and released it as Zelos advanced. But Zelos’s dagger knocked it aside, leaving the kobold hurrying to try and load another. And as it did, Zelos cut its head right off.

At this point, the rest of the kobolds judged that arrows wouldn’t work—so they ran at Zelos all at once, trying to get the best of him in close-quarters combat. Kobolds had high physical ability, and more than twice the accelerative force of humans.

It seemed like the kobolds fell into two distinct roles—some leaped high into the air to swoop down on Zelos from above, and others scurried into close

range to impede his movement. But Zelos simply ignored the kobolds coming from above, closed the gap to the ones running at him, and drove his dagger right into one.

Graugh...

The kobold let out a muffled sound. And in the time it had taken Zelos to defeat one of them, countless more closed in on him.

“Black Lightning.”

Bolts of jet-black lightning flew out from around Zelos, striking the kobolds surrounding him and electrocuting them to death in an instant.

“The old guy’s...a mage, right? Why’s he so good in melee combat?”

“Right—he’s way too strong! He seems like more of an assassin than a mage!”

“Sure would be a flashy assassin. Not exactly a ninja, just tearing things up without even trying to hide...”

“He’s landing a lot of hits with his fists, but he doesn’t seem to be using his magic much, huh?”

“He’s so good in hand-to-hand combat, I can’t even tell what he did. Is he really a mage?”

“What even *is* a mage? The more I look at him, the more I feel like I’m kinda nothing in comparison...”

Zelos was slaughtering the kobolds, annihilating wave after wave without mercy. His companions couldn’t help but be surprised.

“If we just sit here stunned, he’s gonna take all our kills. C’mon, you two.”

“Kaaaay.”

“I think it’d probably be faster to just let Zelos kill them all...”

Already struggling with Zelos, the kobolds became agitated by the appearance of *more* enemies.

“I can’t let you be the only one to look cool, okay, Mister? *Paralysis Zone!*”

“Let’s go, Lena!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m struggling to motivate myself, though...”

As Iris fired off an area-of-effect paralysis spell, Lena and Jeanne readied their weapons and rushed in.

Jeanne swung her longsword about, mowing down kobolds, while Lena dealt the finishing blows to those who escaped. Any who still managed to get away from the two of them were blasted by spells from Iris.

Zelos just watched over the three of them now, his job here done. He didn’t intend to get in the way of them leveling up; he was just keeping an eye out for the unlikely event of another ambush.

It didn’t take all that long until Iris, Lena, and Jeanne had finished off all of the kobolds in the area.

Standing amid the sea of kobold corpses, Zelos surveyed his surroundings. And as he did, he saw irrefutable proof that this mine really *was* a dungeon.

The kobolds’ bodies gradually started to turn into dust, and eventually disappeared, leaving nothing but magic stones.

“I-Is... Is this the dungeon eating the kobolds?”

“Probably, yes. It’s the first time I’ve seen it, myself; really, though, what a bizarre way of eating. And why would it leave the magic stones?”

“Now that I think of it, do we really need to take apart the kobold bodies? The magic stones get left behind anyway.”

“What have we been working so hard for, then?! Kobolds don’t give anything useful apart from their magic stones, so I guess we were just wasting our effort by dismantling them...”

“Why did nobody realize that this was a dungeon until now, anyway? Really, it seems odd.”

The reason was that this was an abandoned mine.

While plenty of miners and mercenaries went to mines, they wouldn’t be able to mine properly if there were swarms of monsters inhabiting the place. And if it was a dungeon, those monsters would appear endlessly. Even if people managed to keep them in check at first, the monsters would eventually turn the

tide through their continued reproduction, and the situation would get out of hand.

That was what had happened here—meaning that just about the only ones who came here now were mercenaries aiming to get equipment made or strengthened. And even those mercenaries wouldn't need to come back for a while once they'd mined the materials for their new gear.

Just staying here for two or three days wouldn't be enough to get any detailed information about the place. And what people *did* learn, they generally wouldn't mention to other mercenaries in the area. Sometimes mercenaries would get requests from blacksmiths to come here and mine, bringing them here for that purpose; but there was essentially nobody coming here on a daily basis. As a result, what information was known about the mine was scattered all over the place, and eventually just died out over time without being passed on to other people.

In other words, it was as if nobody really knew what actually went on in this abandoned mine. Even if someone *did* leave some monster corpses behind, only for them to disappear, they just thought that some other monster must have eaten them.

“Is the mining spot still up ahead?”

“Yeah. I feel like the layout's changed a fair bit, though...”

“Is that so? I suppose that'd mean that the dungeon's growing, then.”

“I remember this part being a narrow tunnel. But now it's more like some big open floor... Did it seriously change its layout in such a short time?”

If what Jeanne was saying was true, the dungeon had changed its layout. That would mean it was quite powerful—and if the dungeon core went unfound, the abandoned mine would forever remain a dungeon.

Zelos, however, wasn't interested in conquering the dungeon. His thinking was that if the monsters were reproducing enough to cause a stampede, then all he needed to do was to thin out their numbers.

If he conquered the dungeon just because it was convenient for him, he'd have to think of all the people who'd be troubled by that.

That was especially true for Arhaus. Upon his visiting the village, his impression had been that while it wasn't exactly in decline, it was a bit of a desolate place, with not that many villagers. He didn't see many locals walking around the town; it was mostly mercenaries who waltzed freely about the streets, and *not* the pleasant sort. Brawls and disturbances were common, and the knights stationed in the village weren't very proactive about controlling them.

Still, it was thanks to the abandoned mine that the villagers were able to make a living for themselves in Arhaus. So if somebody were to conquer the dungeon that made people come to the mine in the first place, the village might be left unable to support itself. As things stood, Arhaus was just barely able to scrape things together to make ends meet; acting rashly here could mean leaving the villagers destitute. Dungeons could bring about the worst calamities, but they also offered significant boons.

"We've finished collecting the magic stones!"

"Let's keep going, then. If we manage to get enough metal, I think we should be able to get you that new sword, Jeanne!"

"Yeah. I'm here for my sword. I don't care about the dungeon."

The four of them headed farther into the mine, each with their own goals in mind. Iris and Lena were there to collect magic stones to cover their living expenses; Jeanne, to get ore for a sword; and Zelos, to gather up the materials required for making a rice dryer, a fridge, and other such equipment that'd be useful for his farming life. Zelos was only getting more and more ideas for things he wanted to create.

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Christine de Elwell was the third daughter of the Elwell viscount family—and by all rights, she should've been headed to the Istol Academy of Magic right now.

But at the moment, she was in the middle of training to become a knight.

The successor to the Elwell viscount family would usually have been a male. As no son had been born to the family, it had adopted a son-in-law from

another family.

That son-in-law was Christine's father, Edward. He had been the vice squad captain of the Order of Knights for the royal guard, and was known as a brave yet gentle man. One day, however, out on a mission to subjugate some bandits, he'd been hit by a poisoned arrow. That had been the end of him.

With Christine's two older sisters both having married into other families already, there had been no men left to succeed the Elwell viscount family—and so *she* was left as the successor. For whatever reason, the bloodline seemed to produce far more girls than boys.

The whole situation only made it all the more important for Christine to be heading to Istol Academy of Magic. But the truth was, she was incapable of using magic. More specifically, she was able to etch the magic formulas into her subconscious, but she wasn't able to activate them. Her academic abilities were perfectly acceptable, but her disposition seemed to be the problem. And so she had come to the abandoned mine, looking both to train herself up and to collect materials for a sword.

Christine had heard stories from her father, Edward—stories about how when he was younger and working as a mercenary, he had gone into the mine to collect ore for making a sword, allowing him to obtain one entirely with his own earnings.

Now she aimed to follow in his footsteps and create a sword for herself the same way.

She didn't expect to become a mercenary herself, of course; but she had cut her long hair short and passed herself off as a boy before coming here. And now she was in the middle of mining.

Gripping the handle of a pickaxe with her slender fingers, she was doing her best to excavate some ore. But she was struggling.

At the end of the day, she was physically weak, so the work was going slowly.

Christine gave a grunt of exertion. "I didn't know mining would be this hard. I guess I underestimated it."

"Well, it *is* usually a job for men. Mining's a tough job."

“I’m sorry for dragging you along with such a selfish request, everyone!”

“I don’t mind. You’re responsible for the Elwell family; it’s only natural for us to protect you.”

Christine was surrounded by four knights dressed as mercenaries, all working to get the mining done.

All four of them had learned the basics under her father, Edward, and had been orphans born on the streets.

All of them were indebted to Edward, and had sworn an oath of allegiance to the Elwell family.

“Really, though, it was terrible of us to leave you all alone back there, Lady Christine...”

“Yeah. Just *thinking* about how we let those brutes get away with it...”

“Next time we see them, we’ll have their damn heads!”

All four knights nodded in agreement. They’d been off gathering information—and right when they’d returned to Christine’s side, they’d seen a mage with the tip of his sword at one of the mercenaries’ throats.

“That was amazing, huh? I couldn’t even tell when he drew that sword.”

“He seemed incredibly skilled. He might even be stronger than Lord Edward was.”

“He was a mage, though! It doesn’t make sense!”

“Must be a mage from some other country. One who’s been through all sorts of terrible battles.”

The knights had found the mage in shady clothes to be fearsome, but at the same time, he’d piqued their interest.

His skill in drawing the sword was one thing—and then there was the way that he’d used magic alone, without any materials, to repair Christine’s sword. It was unheard of. Clearly he was an exceptional man, both with the sword and with his magic. Not the sort who should usually be some nobody.

“This is probably enough ore, I think.”

“Yeah—all that’s left now is to get out of here and prepare to go back to our own territory. I’m looking forward to seeing what kind of sword this’ll get turned into!”

Having already fulfilled their goal, the group started preparing to leave the mine.

But they were completely unaware of what this mine *really* was: a dungeon.

Dungeons were filled with all sorts of traps. The older the dungeon, the truer that was—and sometimes those traps could bare their fangs at you without any warning.

The traps were there to sustain the dungeon; they generally caught and took down monsters when the life force that fed the dungeon was running low. But sometimes humans would get caught up in them too.

“Hya—?!”

All of a sudden, as she was walking along with the knights, Christine got sucked into a hole in the ground. She’d fallen victim to a trap commonly known as a pit chute. The hole that had opened in the ground suddenly closed right back up again.

The knights shouted together: “*Lady Christine!*”

They hurried to try and open the pit again—but once a pit chute closed, you wouldn’t be able to open it up again for a while. The chute stayed firmly shut, as if it were laughing at the efforts of the frantic knights.

Chapter 13: The Old Guy Screws Up

Zelos and his companions made their way along the unchanging tunnel, destroying whatever monsters appeared along the way. But it was taking quite a while to get to a mining spot.

For each layer you went down in a dungeon, the monsters increased in both number and strength. The monsters were supplied with mana by the dungeon, so they didn't go hungry, and their appetites were numbed.

Because of that, monsters here gave themselves fully to their other instincts: reproduction and fighting. They also tended to sleep quite a lot. It gave one the impression that they were kind of *lacking* as monsters—though it didn't stop them from being a threat.

As the group proceeded down the layers, they started to see traps, which they needed to avoid as they pushed on. Zelos took responsibility for detecting all of the traps, though, so the group was able to push ahead safely.

"There's a trap over there. Fortunately for us, it's not an explosive one...though it's kind of a shame to just keep finding the same type every time."

"What do you mean, it's a shame?! You're crazy, Mister! I don't want to get caught in *any* trap."

"Anyone who *did* want to would have to be a huge masochist. Well, that could be fun to watch, in its own way."

"You know, Lena, sometimes I just don't know about you..."

While all they'd seen so far were pit traps, some traps used poisonous gas, or electric shocks, or even explosives. In *Swords & Sorceries*, getting caught by a trap did almost no damage to you anyway—but in this world, some of the traps could seriously cause you to lose a limb. Theoretically, you could use healing magic to neatly regenerate lost body parts, but actually doing that would require keeping yourself supplied with enough nutrients to recreate those body parts. You could have all the regenerative powers you wanted, but you still

needed to get the required nutrients from some external source or another if you wanted to regenerate lost body parts. That was another one of the differences between the game and reality.

Essentially, it meant that regenerating a person's lost body parts wasn't currently feasible here.

What worried Zelos was the possibility that Iris saw her knowledge of games and light novels not just as a reference, but as common sense in this new world. There was no such thing as respawning or immortality here, so if you fought like you were playing a game, you were very likely to die. Reality wasn't the same as games; you couldn't rely on your enemies to follow set attack patterns, leaving you constantly at risk of death, with no way of knowing what was going to happen next.

And Zelos certainly didn't want to watch a fellow reincarnator—let alone a young girl—just die like that.

“Hmm... There are some enemies up ahead. Megaspiders. Shall we take them down?”

“How many? I wanna know what we're up against.”

“Three of them. Should be an easy win for the three of you. What do you want to do?”

The three women exchanged glances.

“Magic stones from spiders could get us a pretty juicy income, right?”

“They're tough bastards, though. I'm worried hitting them could hurt the sword more than the spiders.”

“I kind of want the experience points, though... Wanna do it?”

“The word ‘juicy’ reminds me—I had a deep-fried spider once, and it tasted pretty similar to shrimp. I wonder if we can eat these things too? They're big enough, so they'd at least be filling, but I feel like that might make their flavor kind of bland too...”

The three women responded in unison: “You want to eat the spiders? And wait, you've eaten one before?!”

It had been back on Earth, when Zelos was on an overseas business trip. He'd gone to a restaurant that he'd been promised would serve gourmet food—and when he'd arrived, he'd been served a deep-fried tarantula, which he'd proceeded to eat. He'd also eaten a giant centipede before, and had a history of managing to get by wherever he found himself.

The food he'd been served at the restaurant had actually just been a prank of sorts by the local client company's employees, who'd meant to surprise him. It seemed like they'd never expected him to actually eat it. Maybe Zelos had a real talent for adapting to new environments.

"Damn, that went well with a drink..."

The women responded together again: "So you really *did* eat it!"

"The chilled monkey brain was kind of gross, even for me. I remember when they brought out the tray—there was just a severed monkey head sitting right on it! And its face looked like it was kind of angry at me too..."

Silence.

Zelos let out a puff of cigarette smoke, and it floated away through the air as if to signify his melancholy.

It was apparent that the global financial crisis had been hard on him in more ways than one. It seemed like there might have been days that made the run of all-nighters in crunch time look almost like heaven.

"Oh, the calf brain was tasty, though! Kind of like with the monkey brain, it was just served as a cow head on a plate, so it didn't *look* great. But at least that one was served hot, and it had this lovely, melt-in-your mouth texture to it that was—"

"Please, stop! I don't want to hear it!"

"Noooo! You're gonna make me imagine iiiit!"

Jeanne, meanwhile, was just frothing at the mouth, having suffered a mental KO and fainted on her feet.

Zelos had worked himself into a real fervor talking about all the gross foods he'd eaten over the years—and each of the three women had a very vivid

imagination. They'd all had their minds hijacked by unpleasantly high resolution images of the bizarre meals Zelos had described.

"Anyway, what do you want to do about the megaspiders?"

"Are you seriously expecting us to fight like *this*, Mister?! Are you a sadist or something? Seriously, are you?!"

"Urgh... I can't get the image of a monkey's severed head out of my heeeaaaad!"

Jeanne was still silent—and in fact, she was starting to feel like she could see a field of flowers in her mind's eye. She'd sustained a full-on critical hit from Zelos's words alone; it seemed like she was about to embark on a trip to the afterlife.

She was usually so masculine, but her mind could be rather fragile at times like this.

Zelos, meanwhile, just smoked another cigarette, breathing out another puff of tobacco smoke.

"Even women have to be tough if they want to survive. But every woman's soft on the inside."

"The whole hard-boiled thing doesn't suit you, you know, Mister? Just drop it. And how about you just stop dressing so shady, while you're at it?"

"I refuse. It's a policy of mine."

"You're lying! I refuse to believe you live by any sort of policy."

"I...don't even know how to respond to that. Am I meant to start crying?"

It was a mean thing for Iris to say, but it was true—in reality, Zelos just liked how his shady outfit made him look. He didn't live by ideals any loftier than any other farmer's.

By this point, the group had spent enough time quibbling that the megaspiders had apparently gone somewhere else. The three women had missed their chance for a good profit.

Ultimately, the three of them ended up resenting Zelos for costing them their

payday. He felt terribly alone.

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As Zelos walked along, continuing to feel the cold glares of the three women who resented him for their lost income, he reached a fork in the tunnel.

He heard a noise from up ahead—and when he tried to focus on it, he thought he could just barely make out the sound of something being hit hard with a metallic object at a mining site. It didn't sound like what you'd expect from a battle. And whatever was being struck, it was happening over and over again, sounding as if whoever was doing the hitting was somehow impatient.

"That's...not the sound of fighting, is it? It's almost like people are just flailing away recklessly at...*something*. But what?"

"Dunno. Maybe you're just imagining it, Mister?"

"If you're hearing something apart from fighting here, it's probably mining. That's not too uncommon 'round here."

"You know we still haven't forgiven you for earlier, Zelos, don't you?"

Once women got cross with you, it was hard to get them back into a good mood. Zelos could still feel their glares boring into him.

At the same time, the fact that they were being *this* stubborn about it was making even Zelos kind of annoyed—enough to make him blurt out, "By the way, about that *cold monkey brain* I mentioned earlier—I didn't get to tell you about the *taste*! It was—"

The three women all plugged their ears at once.

"Why did you have to bring that back up?! You made me imagine it again!"

"So you really *are* a sadist! Ugh. Right when I was finally about to get it out of my mind..."

Jeanne was just trembling again.

"Oh, no, I'm not mentioning it for any particular reason. I was just thinking, if you keep ignoring me and not caring about unusual signs inside a dungeon, you could pretty easily end up dead. That's all."

Zelos muttered that warning with an easygoing tone—and quite the grin on his face. It seemed like he held more of a grudge than you’d expect.

He really did have a nasty personality at times.

“Anyway, leaving that little story behind— Oh. There are more megaspiders now. Seems like they’re heading toward where that noise was coming from. There are about ten of them; what do you want to do?”

“I’d like to get their spinnerets, if we could. They’re a raw material for spider silk, after all.”

“I get that they sell for a lot, but... Ten of them, huh? Wouldn’t that be a little tough?”

“But they’re worth a *lot* of money, right? It might be good to give it a shot, then.”

It seemed like the three women had decided to take on the hunt.

The life of a mercenary wasn’t as lucrative as you might expect. On top of your weapons and armor always getting damaged, you had to pay to keep a stockpile of food, as well as potions for healing and more. You’d also get the occasional quiet period with no work, and your living expenses during those periods would use up the bulk of whatever savings you’d built up from taking requests. It all added up to mean that the three women would be pretty poor unless they could earn themselves some extra money on the side. Financially, they were in fairly dire straits.

The party of four tailed the megaspiders, turning right at the T intersection to head quietly toward where Zelos heard the noise coming from earlier. And as they did, the metallic noises suddenly started to sound completely different. *Now* they were the harsh sounds of combat.

“Shit! We’ve got spiders to deal with now!”

“We’ll hold them off! You hurry up and get to Lady Christine as fast as you can!”

“I know! But it’s just not opening!”

“Hurry up! There are a lot of these bastards!”

Whoever was up ahead, it sounded like they were having trouble. They came into sight: four people who looked like mercenaries, engaged in combat with the megaspiders. Generally, the rule in this kind of situation was not to get involved—but before they could give it much thought, Zelos’s whole party moved straight into action.

“*Hrah!*”

Jeanne made a diagonal slash from the top right—and as the spider recoiled, Lena plunged her shortsword right into it.

“Iris!”

“I know! *Rock Blast!*”

Iris shot countless rocks at the flanks of the megaspiders, defeating three of them.

Zelos then surged through them like a gale, a sword in each hand, making slash after slash as he went. He severed all four legs off one side of a number of the spiders.

He then immediately swung around to their other flank and cut three of the spiders into pieces.

“Four left!”

“Thanks for the help! We’re—”

“Save the chat for later. For now, focus on finishing the spiders!”

“Right! My apologies.”

With the help of Zelos’s four-person party, the other group managed to barely subdue the attacking megaspiders, escaping their predicament. Once they were done, Lena and Jeanne got straight to dismantling the monsters’ bodies with glee, while Iris tried her best not to watch as they did. It seemed like the sight was just impossible for her to get used to on a physiological level.

“You saved us there. Allow me to give you our thanks.”

“No, it’s quite all right. It’s important to help each other out in situations like these. By the way, what are knights like yourselves doing here? Are you dealing

with some sort of trouble?”

“Wh-What?! How... How did you know we were knights?”

“Your swords all have the same shape—and they’ve got the same family crest on them. So you’re knights for some noble or another, aren’t you? I was working as a private tutor for some nobles at one point, you see, so I’ve had the opportunity to see these same sorts of mass-produced swords before.”

Even if they were dressed like mercenaries, the knights always used the same swords. When some task or another required knights to go without their usual armor, their swords served as an ID of sorts, making them important items. Being mass-produced, all of those swords had the same design, and were engraved with a seal that showed they were knights of this country. The swords were also engraved with a separate family crest, which served to prove that they had earned the trust of a particular noble family and become that family’s retainers. A knight could therefore show that sword to prove that they served a specific noble family, giving them a certain level of social standing and allowing them to be differentiated from knights who served other noble families.

“I didn’t know you were such an esteemed mage! In fact, to tell you the truth, we would really appreciate having you share some of your wisdom with us here, sir.”

“I’m really not impressive enough to be called ‘sir.’ But sure—do you have some sort of problem?”

“Just earlier, Lady Christine—the noble we serve—fell into a pit chute here. We really want to save her, but we just can’t get the thing to open back up...”

“What?! Well, that *does* sound bad.”

“Who would even *put* such a horrible trap here?! Argh!”

Pit chutes were a common type of trap in dungeons. In short, they were essentially a pit trap—but depending on what layer of the dungeon you were in, they could lead to different places. In extreme cases, falling into one in the upper parts of a dungeon could sometimes lead you right to the deepest depths of the dungeon. Of course, the monsters there would be stronger as well—so if an apprentice mercenary fell victim to such a trap, they’d have virtually no

chance of survival. While you could never know where exactly you were going to end up, you could potentially end up face-to-face with a powerful monster. So if you weren't suitably skilled, falling down a pit chute could put you in danger of ending up as nothing more than sustenance for the dungeon.

"It seems like you were a little too slow to notice that this place is a dungeon, eh? The question now is, what exactly does the chute here lead to..."

"A-A dungeon? Are you saying this mine is a *dungeon*?!"

"Hey, Mister? I think these people were with that girl whose sword you fixed. Meaning that the one who fell is probably..."

"You don't need to finish; I assumed as much. Anyway, it opened up once before, so it shouldn't be that odd for it to open up again, would it?"

Zelos casually walked over and stood on the closed cover of the pit chute.

It was well and truly shut tight. Even the weight of an adult wasn't enough to make it budge in the slightest.

"It really *isn't* opening, huh? Maybe you could find her by taking another path, but that'd take some time. I suppose I may as well just—"

THUNK!

Having pondered over the situation for a bit, Zelos had been halfway through saying, "I suppose I may as well just blow it up with a spell." But before he could finish, the pit chute's cover had opened up from inside—and Zelos disappeared, falling right down into the hole. It was like something right out of a lazily made comedy skit.

"Mister!"

"Sir Mage!"

"Aren't things just...twice as bad, now?"

"Th-That wasn't on *purpose*, right?"

"At least it should have taken him to where Lady Christine is. He seems like a pretty skilled mage, so he should probably be okay. We should try to find another way to get to them."

The knights sprang straight into action. Iris, meanwhile, ended up waiting for Lena and Jeanne, who were still in the middle of dismantling the megaspider corpses.

She wasn't worried about Zelos in the slightest. After all, she knew all the stories about the Destroyers. If anything, she was worried for the dungeon itself.

*

Fortunately, this pit chute was shaped something like a slide.

Still, falling onto that slide from about three meters up dealt a hard blow to Zelos's rear. And after that initial fall, he couldn't stop himself from sliding quite some distance down a tunnel with a slippery, bumpy surface, leaving his butt in even more pain.

He'd hit his back pretty hard as well, so his senses were numbed somewhat.

"Urgh... I hope that didn't graze my ass. Anyway, that wasn't what I was planning, but I guess I've ended up in the same place where that noble girl should be. So let's see where Milady's gotten off to, shall we? Pfft... Talking like that doesn't suit me, does it?"

Zelos walked along, hand rubbing his back. The spot where he and Christine had fallen was a relatively tight tunnel, with about three meters to the roof. The path only seemed to go in one direction, but there was no way of knowing what sort of thing could attack, so Zelos kept his guard up.

Here, the same as earlier, the walls were lighting up the area with a faint blue glow. Zelos suddenly stopped, and started thinking, his expression grim.

This light... It's not radioactive, is it? If the laws of physics here are the same as on Earth, it wouldn't be odd for something like that to exist. What should I do if my hair starts falling out?

The light was actually coming from something known as glowstone, a type of stone that glowed in the dark. It wasn't radioactive or otherwise dangerous.

But Zelos, who hadn't used his Appraisal on it, was fearful that it *could* be dangerous, and he was shaking from that fear.

If this stuff *were* somehow radioactive, then he would've already been doomed the moment he entered the mine.

But he hadn't realized that for now.

GYOOOOHR!

A scream from something that sounded like a monster brought Zelos back to his senses.

"Just thinking about it won't do me any good. I'd better hurry up and find the girl. I don't want the poor thing to end up as food, after all..."

Opting to make Christine's rescue his top priority, Zelos set off at a run—and was left speechless by what he saw. Ahead of him, the tunnel floor dropped off into a twenty-meter cliff, with a foothold of just thirty centimeters or so left on the side—barely enough for a person to shuffle their way along.

To get through, Zelos would have no option but to press his body up against the wall, and grab onto whatever rocks he could. But even before he could get to that point, Zelos, as an adult, found the foothold to be too narrow for him. He wouldn't be able to make it.

"What sort of crazy uncharted territory *is* this? I've never had to do rock climbing before!"

He was sure that Christine must have come through here. But Zelos simply couldn't get past. He was at that age where he had to watch his weight, after all; asking him to traverse such a narrow path was a bit much.

Below the cliff was a vast sandy area, with stone pillars scattered about, towering over the surroundings. There were also countless sand worms writhing in the sand. It was the sort of thing that made you feel sick just from looking at it.

I can't even see the other side. Also, just how far down did I fall? This is almost like an underground world from some old movie.

It seemed like the worms were all moving in one direction, as if they were being guided there by something.

Trying to think about these things in terms of underground animals I know

from back on Earth, they're probably got really weak eyes and ears. So I'm guessing they find their prey by sensing vibrations with their skin or some other organ. And what could be causing vibrations like that down here? A different type of monster? From the looks of them, I don't think the sand worms would be able to burrow through rocks, which would mean they're probably reacting to some kind of faint vibration coming through those rocks. At their huge size, though? I find it hard to believe they could detect that...

Creatures with huge bodies would have duller senses to match their size. Only very faint vibrations would be able to pass through a rock, and those vibrations should be drowned out by things like general noise in the area and the movements of the other worms.

That was when Zelos suddenly looked up, and saw a huge colony of black bats flying overhead. Considering the situation in an instant, he put together a bit of a theory.

In dungeons, it was common for each layer to only house one particular species of monster. On rare occasion, there'd be a dungeon where multiple different species coexisted, but that only happened in old dungeons that had expanded their territory enough to become truly massive. And at the very least, that wasn't the case here; this abandoned mine was still relatively young as a dungeon. Zelos knew, then—albeit only from books—that there should be a maximum of three types of monsters in the area. And given that he could currently see both the sand worms and the bats—specifically, a type known as howling bats—he judged that he was probably in the deepest layer. Howling bats were small, but they fed by sucking blood, so they wouldn't attack small prey. They lived alongside large monsters.

The most notable quirk of these bats was that they guided larger monsters using sound waves. While it wasn't as if they could control the minds of those larger monsters, the bats could work together as a colony, making their sound waves all resonate together to create a resonant frequency of sorts that would then guide the large monsters to prey for them to eat.

Then, while the larger monsters—here, the worms—were feasting on their prey, the bats would suck their blood. But here of course, they were in a dungeon, where monsters could live even without feeding. So that behavior

was meaningless.

Even if a human were to walk along the rocky wall, it wouldn't cause a vibration large enough for the massive worms to detect. And from the worms' perspective, a human was no threat.

But what about the perspective of the far weaker howling bats? They were usually more on the side of prey than predator, and only measured about as large as the palm of a human hand. Small monsters feared predators larger than themselves—and the howling bats, in particular, tended to try and guide larger monsters to those predators to eliminate the threat.

"Which means she's probably somewhere in front of that mess of worms, huh? The bats could be a nuisance, though. Well, at least it seems like she's closer than she could have been, so that's one good thing..."

Zelos reasoned that if he didn't eliminate the colony of bats, Christine would very likely end up getting eaten.

If the howling bats worked together to create a resonant frequency in a particular location, the effect of that resonance could generate heat. And at any moment now, the bats could hit Christine with such an attack, causing her to fall from the rocky outcropping. So for now, he concluded, he had to ensure her safety.

Zelos thrust forward his right arm, gathered a great amount of mana in it, and activated a spell formula inside his subconscious. The dense magic formula then appeared in the palm of his hand.

"Purgatory Blaze."

The spell blazed off, and a tsunami of fire spread around the ceiling of the tunnel, sweeping over the bats.

Being weak to begin with, the bats had no fire resistance, and most burned immediately to a crisp in temperatures thousands of degrees hot. Those that did survive realized a new threat had appeared, and hurried to spread out and escape.

With the bats out of the way, Zelos used his flight spell, Shadowraven's Wings, and leaped from the precipice.

He was aiming for the spot where the howling bats had been crowded together just moments before. The girl he needed to rescue was probably there.

*

Christine was taking her time, slowly inching her feet side to side along the narrow outcropping.

Her delicate hands were getting covered in all sorts of cuts from the rock wall, but she was putting up with the pain and gripping onto tiny handholds wherever she could find them.

A colony of bats was swarming nearby—and for some reason, she was being followed by a group of massive worms.

Fortunately, the worms weren't able to climb up the rocky wall. But if she fell, she'd be done for.

And now, she had just come up against her greatest obstacle yet.

*

When Christine first fell down the pit trap, she was at a loss.

She landed in something that looked like a rocky cave, but she couldn't tell whether it was safe or not. So, judging that it would be dangerous to just stay there, she decided to get moving. She made her way along the narrow tunnel she'd landed in and, after a while, emerged in a huge area filled with rocks and sand.

Down below her were countless worms writhing about in the sand; whether she liked it or not, it was clear to her that falling down there would mean guaranteed death. But she was currently at the top of a cliff, probably about twenty meters high.

All around her was nothing but jagged rocks. As much as she wanted to move, she couldn't see any real path to follow. Feelings of helplessness and isolation flashed through her mind.

“Wh-What should I do...?”

At a loss, she simply slumped down onto the ground and stayed there for a

while, catatonic. She didn't know how long she stayed like that. But eventually, when she raised her gaze, she just so happened to spot a narrow foothold along the rocky wall.

I can't just sit here forever. I have to do something to get back up to where I was...

Having made up her mind, Christine dug her toes into the narrow foothold and grabbed onto any tiny handholds she could find, slowly making her way across.

She kept it up for a while—though she had no idea exactly how long. Every minute, every second, seemed to stretch on forever, and she had no choice but to devote the entirety of her focus to each and every step she made.

Before she realized, her hands were stained with blood and dirt—and they were starting to get numb. She looked down and saw a reality that she would've preferred to deny: the worms were swarming together right below her. She knew that if she fell, she'd be eaten, and the thought drove a stake of terror into her heart.

She was resolved to stay alive—and that being the case, her only choice was to keep going. But at the same time, she was becoming more fatigued, more exasperated, with every passing moment. The bats flying around above her never quieted down...and while she wasn't sure if it was her imagination, she thought she was starting to feel a vibration, as if the rocky wall were shaking slightly.

"I've got to keep going. There's a ledge just ahead. Dad, please watch over me..."

Mustering her willpower as best she could, Christine made it almost to the ledge on the other side—and that was when she came up against her greatest obstacle yet.

Just before the ledge, there was a section of rock wall suddenly jutting out at an angle, blocking her path. Anyone hoping to make it through a section like that would have to be quite the skilled rock climber. That Christine had managed to make it this far was thanks to the fact that the rock wall had so far been angled slightly forward, allowing her to lean on it as she moved, and take

short rests against it whenever she got tired. But for the next section she had to get past, the rock wall was angled in the opposite direction. It would be impossible for novices to advance barehanded; at the very least, they'd need equipment like ropes, carabiners, harnesses, and so on. It was an insurmountable obstacle, especially for a girl in her teens.

"N-No! Just when I'd made it so far..."

Christine felt a pang of despair in her heart. She'd been so focused on moving forward that she hadn't thought to make sure she had a viable path the whole way across.

Still, you could hardly blame that on the girl herself, considering the extreme situation she was in. She was just desperate to get back alive, and that desperation had caused her to make a simple mistake.

At the same time, it wasn't as if she could just stay where she was forever. Even as despair continued to take hold of her, she resolved herself to press on.

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

"Wh-What?! What's—"

Out of nowhere, Christine heard an explosion. Given the situation she was in, she couldn't exactly fully turn around to look, but she did her best to get an idea of what was going on.

As she did, she saw the charred bodies of dead bats falling from the sky. They'd probably been blown up by the explosion she just heard, whatever it was.

"So there's a monster here that can do something like that...?"

Stricken by feelings of panic and frustration, Christine tried again to get close as she could to the ledge.

By this point, she couldn't muster up the strength. But she wasn't going to just give up. The overhang was gradually draining away her energy; she was struggling to keep enough strength in her fingertips. The more time passed, the closer she came to her limits.

And then, she *reached* those limits.

“A—”

Christine felt a sudden sense of weightlessness. She looked up, and saw the rock wall and the ledge getting farther and farther away.

That was when she realized: she was falling.

I'm sorry, Dad. I think this might be it for me...

Not only was she about to die without fulfilling her dreams—she hadn't even set out on the journey toward those dreams yet. But her first instinct was to apologize to her late father in her heart. She was also worried about her mother, who was still alive; but whatever the case, there was nothing she could do now.

More than the frustration, she felt a surging feeling of *grief*—grief at her own powerlessness. Tears began to fall down her cheeks.

The ground below was sand, so maybe she had a slight chance at surviving the landing. But she had neither the confidence nor the stamina left to run away from the countless worms that were writhing around below. She prepared herself to die, closed her eyes, and—

“Hup. Gotcha.”



Hearing a man's weirdly relaxed-sounding voice, Christine reopened her eyes. She could see the arms of the man holding her from behind—and a gray robe that looked somehow familiar.

“Whew! That was a close one, wasn't it? I almost didn't make it.”

That way the man was speaking sounded familiar to Christine as well. It was the mage who'd repaired her sword just this morning.

She was relieved to have been saved—but at the same time, she couldn't believe what her eyes were telling her. The two of them were floating in midair.

“Wh—?! We... *Aaaahhhh!* We're *flying*?!”

“Hey! Would you mind calming down a bit? Flight magic only lasts so long, and it uses mana the whole time, so even carrying you in the first place is putting a bit of a burden on me, you know...”

“I-I'm sorry...”

“As long as you understand. Now, then...”

The two of them slowly floated back up, and landed on the ledge.

“Are you hurt? Your companions up there were worried about you.”

“I'm fine. U-Um... This is the second time you've saved me. Thank you so much!”

“Eh, don't worry about it. When you're in a dungeon, it's essential to help each other out. This is nothing.”

“Huh? A dungeon?”

Christine wasn't entirely sure whether to believe the words of the mage in front of her. But that mage—Zelos—was more focused on looking below. He let out a sigh. The ground was covered by a whole pack of worms, wriggling about with nowhere to go; the two of them wouldn't be able to get out without getting past *that*. Or at least, that was what Christine thought...but it seemed like Zelos had a different idea.

“It'd be dangerous if all of these got ejected out of the dungeon and went on a stampede, right? Should I just exterminate them?”

Christine wasn't sure whether to believe her ears.

"Um... Mr. Mage? It sounded like you just said something kind of disturbing there..."

"Oh—the name's Zelos. Call me that, please, Christine."

"O-Okay. More importantly, though, did you say you were going to *exterminate* them? But there are so many! How are you going to—"

"If I wanted to, I could do it pretty simply. But a straight-up massacre just isn't my style, you see."

It seemed as if Zelos had taken her "how" at face value, thinking more about the *method* than about whether he'd be able to do it in the first place. Seemingly, he was confident in his ability to obliterate even this number of worms.

Going by his appearance, however, that was hard to believe. Christine was unable to hide her bewilderment.

The man in question, meanwhile, just continued to look at the worms and mutter to himself.

"I don't just want to slaughter them, but there really *are* a lot of the things... Honestly, at my age, it'd be beyond embarrassing to just go in there, like, 'Look at me! Look at how strong I am!' But at the same time, if I just ignore them and they make it outside, there'd probably be more casualties, so it's turned into kind of a pain. Seriously—I just came here to do some mining... I'd rather not, but I guess I *will* just have to burn them all. I feel sorry for the poor things, but I'll need them to die for me. Even if it probably will result in a bit of lava... Hmm. That said, I *do* need some worms for my fields... Oh well."

"Huh? Lava? Casualties? What are you talking about? A-And these aren't just earthworms, you know! They're different! They're omnivorous! They eat meat!"

Zelos wasn't listening to her.

He took a cigarette out of his breast pocket, lit it, and casually let out a puff of smoke. Then he raised his left arm.

“Purgatory Blaze: Charred Annihilation.”

A huge amount of mana started to flow out from Zelos. A cube formed on his palm, containing that mana, and fired out into the center of the massive space they were in. And once it was there, it expanded into a high-density magic formula.

The formula rapidly took in the mana from the surrounding space, and converted that mana into physical phenomena to execute the instructions it had been given, activating a force of destruction. It was an incredibly dangerous spell—one capable of turning this entire enormous layer into scorched earth.

The collected mana turned into an ultrahot blaze that engulfed the worms. For an instant, the resulting heat reached ten thousand degrees, and formed a shock wave that swept through the area, covering it in what really did seem to be flames right out of purgatory.

“Whoops. Layered Impenetrable Ice Barrier, times fifty.”

To avoid getting caught up in his own attack, Zelos wrapped the ledge that he and Christine were on in fifty layers of a defensive icy wall, at a temperature of absolute zero—just a moment before both the high-temperature shock wave and the blazing flames hit. They might have been in a large area, but that previous spell still wasn’t the sort of thing he should’ve used in a closed space.

A deep rumbling sound started. A violent tremor ran through the inside of the mine. It was as if there were an underground nuclear test being carried out.

The heat continued to rise and rise, and Zelos’s barrier was already at absolute zero; it wasn’t as if he could make it any colder. Cracks started to form in the barrier as a result of the raging heat. It wouldn’t last too much longer.

“Well, that’s not good. Gaia Control.”

Realizing that his ice barrier wouldn’t last, Zelos used magic to control the earth, creating a thick layer of rock to surround both Christine and himself.

The cigarette he’d been holding in his mouth fell onto the ledge.

Just to be safe, Zelos created multiple layers of the rock wall as well, and decided to quietly stay put inside until the tremors subsided.

Magic could convert mana into a destructive physical force, but that force would then promptly turn back into mana.

That meant that the flames filled with destructive energy disappeared before long. The tremors then subsided as well, so Zelos manipulated the rock wall he'd formed and headed out to take a look...only to immediately find an unpleasant sweat forming on his brow. The entire rock surface outside of his barrier had melted, fusing into what looked like a uniform, disfigured world.

The ceiling had caved in too—enough so that he could see up to the other layers now. And while the effects of his magic had disappeared, the heat stored within the physically melted rock wouldn't just disappear like that.

"Damn, that's hot!"

The heat was rapidly passing through the many barrier layers he'd formed. The space outside of his magical barriers was even hotter; not at all the sort of environment where humans could stay. And that heat had begun to melt what remained of his ice barriers and make its way through to the air inside.

"Crap. Standard magic, Cocytus, ongoing multicast! Area magic, Calamity Cyclone, urgent activation! And then—annihilation magic, Zephyrus's Harsh Approach!"

Having gotten a bad premonition from the speed at which the heat was starting to seep through his defenses, Zelos spammed a wide-area freezing spell to cool down the area. After a little bit of time, the temperature outside his barriers rapidly came back down, and he dropped what remained of his barriers as he looked around and tried to get an idea of the situation. If he hadn't cooled the area down, he would've essentially been in the middle of a blast furnace right now.

On top of just cooling the space down, Zelos had figured that all the fire he'd made would have drained the area of its oxygen. So he'd also cast a combination of air-based area magic and annihilation magic to bring that supply back. A tornado that reached up to the ceiling brought a supply of fresh air, which it circulated throughout the space to replenish the oxygen levels. All while further demolishing the rock ceiling in the process...

What had become a world of lava was just as quickly cooled, hardened, and

refilled with air—though only because of Zelos’s intervention.

Still, despite Zelos’s efforts, heat continued to seep out from the rock surface around them, and there were parts that were clearly still melting and glowing red-hot. It was like a scene out of hell. In addition, a huge hole had been blasted through the ceiling above; it was hard to tell just how many layers it had gone through. Zelos gained a newfound appreciation for the might of his annihilation magic; it had been beyond even his own expectations.

He paused for a moment, sheepish. “Did I go a little overboard, perhaps? I feel like maybe I could’ve just used *regular* area magic there. And I really hope I didn’t cause any casualties in the upper layers with that. Yeah, I think I’m gonna have to keep that one locked away from now on. Jeez...”

Zelos had been made keenly aware of the difference between his old digital world and his new reality.

In the games he was used to, even the most stupidly strong spell could only inflict damage in the form of numbers—data. After all, it wasn’t as if spells in a game could do any harm in the *real* world. But when the place you were using annihilation magic was, itself, reality—and a closed space, to boot—things were completely different.

The flames themselves had dissipated and turned back into mana, but the rock surface that had been melted by the monstrous heat from those flames wouldn’t be cooling down anytime soon. And with this being a closed space, the heat would only continue to accumulate, pushing the temperature inside higher and higher.

Zelos had used annihilation magic to replenish all the air that had been consumed by the fire—but now, the bedrock in the ceiling above had been smashed down to the level of grains of sand, creating a large hole above. He could feel what seemed like a river of cold sweat running down his back.

This whole time, he’d been warning others about how dangerous his magic was—but only now was he realizing that *he* might have been underestimating it more than anyone else. Naturally, it had been so long that he’d forgotten what had happened back when he’d first used wide-area annihilation magic in the Far-Flung Green Depths.

“W-Wide-area annihilation magic... Zelos, who *are* you?! Our country’s a magic kingdom, and even *we* haven’t managed to develop anything *like* that yet!”

“I, uh... I’m just a boring old guy without a job!”

True as it might have been, Zelos’s answer didn’t help him evade the question.

An awkward cold breeze blew the two of them.

“Y-You’re a destroyer...”

Christine spoke in a low, shaking voice, but her words stabbed at Zelos’s heart. She was hardly wrong, given the sheer destruction he’d just caused, but it perturbed him nonetheless. Though it was odd, perhaps, for him to be perturbed by the chuunibyou nickname, given that the magic he’d created was undeniably chuunibyou itself.

When Zelos had played the game, he’d gotten incredibly carried away, going over the top as he relished the opportunity to play around in its fictional world. In fact, he’d taken it so far that his in-game friends had assumed he was a real-life middle schooler.

Such was his cringeworthy past in the virtual world—but who could ever predict that all that would become reality someday?

Regardless, while it might have been a coincidence, the fact remained: this was the first time that Zelos had been called “Destroyer” by one of the *actual* denizens of this world.

Trying to play it off, he pulled out another cigarette and lit it.

But somehow, he couldn’t help but think that this particular cigarette tasted awfully bitter.

Chapter 14: The Old Guy Gets Hyped

A regular high-pitched clinking noise echoed out through the vast underground space.

Zelos was swinging a pickaxe against the wall, then gathering up the chunks of metal that broke off, beaming with a satisfied smile all the while. He hadn't even had to prompt it; one of his full-on cheat skills showed him where the metal was, so all he really had to do was mine wherever it pointed him. As a result, he was collecting metals with ease, and it had put him in a mighty fine mood.

The heat from his wide-area annihilation spell Purgatory Blaze: Charred Annihilation had melted the metals in the walls. That had caused the heavier metals inside the ore to fuse together with other similar clusters, giving Zelos a big haul—including some quite rare finds.

He was then transmuting whatever he collected into ingots, which he systematically stored away in his inventory.

"Hmm? So this shiny rainbow ore here is hihiirogane, is it? I didn't expect to be able to get *that* here! This *is* a good mine. Heh heh heh..."

"Why do I have to mine as well?" A pause, and then: "Huh. There's some weird clayish lump here..."

"That'd be orichalcum. We really *are* lucky! Aha ha ha!"

"Wha—?!"

Christine froze up. She'd just gotten her hands on a hunk of metal that was valuable enough to let her live for more than a decade without working if she sold it.

Zelos was thrilled as he continued to mine. From time to time, he'd use his magic to cause an explosion, destroying part of the wall to get better access to high-quality materials. He'd come here intending to build a fridge, a silo with a built-in dryer, and a pedal-based threshing machine. But having now managed

to mine more than he needed, he was starting to feel the itch to create a bath heater as well.

“I say, it’s just one find after another here... I can’t keep the smile off my face! Haaaah hah hah hah!”

“Is it just me, or has your personality kind of changed? More importantly, though, did you really say this was orichalcum? Are you listening to me? If I’m remembering correctly, orichalcum was...”

“Finally! *Finally*, I’ll be able to get my hands on rice again! Wait for me, sake! Wait for me, soy sauce! Miso! Mirin! And sake, of course! Sweet, sweet *culture*, back in my hands at *last*! *Yippee!*”

“Yeah, you’re not listening at all... What are you even so excited about, anyway? Also, you mentioned ‘sake’ twice. Is it really something that important?”

Zelos was a big fan of sake. To him, it *was* that important.

His pickaxe let out a pleasant sound as it cracked through the hardened lava, sending fragments flying around the area as Zelos made his way into the bedrock. His mining was both incredibly fast and accurate; he’d probably be able to make a good living as a first-rate miner, if he wanted to. And he’d doubtless be the top earner of whatever company he joined, if he did.

Having finally gotten to the mining he’d been planning for a while now, Zelos felt as if he’d gotten one step closer to Japan. The thought of it had his head filled with a lovely warmth. Any Japanese person would yearn for Japanese food when they went overseas, and that was doubly true for Zelos, who knew he’d never be able to go back to Japan at all. He was chasing after the flavors he’d grown up with—and the pursuit had gotten him incredibly hyped.

His ridiculous levels of excitement would keep up for a while yet. Zelos continued to let out bizarre laughter that echoed around the mining site until he was satisfied. Nobody would be able to get through to him, at least for the moment.

When he was finally satisfied, he’d gathered a vast number of all sorts of minerals. Enough that he’d struggle to ever use them all up...

“Well, that was embarrassing! It seems I got a little more excited than somebody my age should.”

“It’s okay; I don’t really mind. But...how about we move somewhere else sooner rather than later? If more monsters appear...”

“What—you’re worried you might get hit by my magic?”

“Yes. Wait—I mean, no! That’s not it. It’s that my level’s too low! I’m not strong enough to fight against monsters!”

“Was that a bit of a Freudian slip I heard there? Not that it bothers me, mind you...”

Zelos had originally come down here to rescue Christine, but as far as he could see, they seemed to be in the dungeon’s bottom layer.

Falling from one of the upper layers all the way down to the very bottom layer was something that shouldn’t usually happen unless you were incredibly unlucky. A young dungeon like this, however, needed to collect mana to maintain its environment, so traps like that probably existed to help the place find victims.

While dungeons didn’t have minds, the fact that they could shift like that to lay traps indicated that they were probably built on some sort of system. The exact mechanisms were unknown, though; dungeons were still shrouded in all sorts of mysteries.

Nonetheless, dungeons were accepted as a natural part of this world. It wasn’t as if the regular inhabitants here found them to be odd, and the only ones to question why this sort of unusual phenomenon happened, and who tried to investigate the causes behind it, were particularly curious scholars.

“Anyway, it...seems like that huge field of sand has turned into a volcano now?”

“Well, yes. My magic was more powerful than I’d been expecting. I swear it was nowhere near that big the last time I used it...”

That was the difference between looking at visual effects in *Swords &*

Sorceries and using the spell for real.

In the first place, the worms crawling around the area had been leagues weaker than Zelos—and he'd come at them with an abundance of firepower nonetheless, burning them to cinders. His nickname of "Destroyer" wasn't just for show.

Perhaps it was a lingering habit from his gaming days, but whatever the reason, Zelos couldn't help but immediately fire off high-power magic whenever he saw a huge group of enemies all bunched together. He hadn't even used an incantation either, so all he'd needed was mana.

"It looked like you fired the magic formula itself at the worms back there, but...how does that even work? That's nothing *like* regular magic!"

"It would surprise me if it *was*. That's why it's so dangerous. Still, though, I wouldn't have thought it'd be *that* powerful..."

Purgatory Blaze: Charred Annihilation was made using an incredibly dense formula. Usually, you'd process a spell's formula in your mind, then deploy a sigil for making the desired phenomenon happen. Zelos's magic, however, effectively copied the entire formula into a shell, which was then fired off toward his enemies. These dense magic formulas, made up of zeros and ones, required the sort of intense high-speed processing that would be virtually impossible to do in a human mind; you simply couldn't expect the brain to carry out the same sort of high-speed processing that a computer was capable of. The idea had been, then, to incorporate a program for processing that data within the spell itself, and use that program as a shell of sorts. And that idea was what had sparked the creation of this wicked, destructive magic.

Since you loaded that magical shell containing the compressed spell formula with the mana required to trigger the spell, then shot it at a target location, the spell's formula would activate upon reaching that location. The high-speed processing program would activate the predetermined formula, and additional mana would be gathered up from the surrounding area. That mana would then be converted into an enormous amount of destructive force, becoming realized as a physical phenomenon.

Zephyrus's Harsh Approach worked in much the same way. Once activated, it

would demolish anything in the area by forming a whirlwind that swept up all of the tiny little bits of debris in the area and spun them around at rapid speed. Any tangible thing that was hit would itself be torn to shreds and added to the whirlwind, only making the spell stronger as it went; in other words, it wasn't the sort of thing that should be used lightly.

If the high-speed processing of dense information could be carried out as part of the magic formula itself, the caster wouldn't need to do the work of deciphering it in their own mind. The wide-area annihilation magic being studied at the Istol Academy of Magic was created with the idea that a vast magic formula would all be processed by a single human mind, but in reality, it was next to impossible for the human mind to carry out the processing required to read a rapidly spinning magic formula and transform it into a physical phenomenon. The sheer burden wasn't something a human could endure.

Even if such a spell *was* created, the first field tests carried out to check its efficacy would probably destroy the brain tissue of the caster, killing them.

It was bad enough that, back when this particular spell was first developed as a prototype in *Swords & Sorceries*, using it had assaulted the caster with an intense headache, causing a safety device fitted to the game equipment to activate and forcibly shut off the connection.

It had been a truly dangerous act—enough so that the user could've ended up crippled had things gone worse.

So translating the magic from the game into reality gives you something insane like this, huh? Thing is, it's far too powerful; there are only so many places you'd even be able to use it. Being in a battle where you just want to annihilate everything is one matter, but most of the time, it'd probably just be better to use standard magic, wouldn't it? I don't want to start any weird rumors—and more than anything, I want to avoid having the state set its sights on me. Seriously, though, I'm amazed I was even able to run a program like this inside the game. It should've just bugged out, right? Does that mean the game world really was another world too?

Zelos was thinking again about the abnormalities in *Swords & Sorceries*, as he had now done many times since arriving in this world.

The core of the game's servers had been a supercomputer commonly known as Babel. Babel had originally been created by the US Department of Defense as an information control system for the purpose of national defense. It had been designed to protect the confidential information of both individuals and the state from worsening levels of online crime and unauthorized access by external parties—but partway through, the project had encountered financial problems and come to a standstill. Unable to maintain the system, the government had then sold it off to a privately owned company.

That company had later made a grand announcement of a certain online game: *Swords & Sorceries*.

While it didn't seem like much creativity had gone into the game's name, the game itself was impressive for being accessible via commercially available, dedicated equipment, allowing users to go out freely on vast adventures in a virtual space. Considering the number of players, it should have had quite the economic impact.

Yet for whatever reason, Zelos had found himself completely unable to remember the developer's name since coming to this world.

In the first place, why am I only thinking about all of this now? The only possibility that comes to mind is that arriving in this other world removed some sort of limit on my mind. Not to mention, I just...can't, for the life of me, think of the name of the company that made the game. Or should I assume that no such company even existed to begin with? This is almost like some corny development out of a light novel or something...

Zelos couldn't stop himself from thinking about the abnormalities of his old world. Comparing it to the world he was in now, both worlds had a lot of similarities, and yet both were different. The way things worked just wasn't quite the same.

He was getting lost deeper and deeper in his thoughts.

"—os. Zelos!"

"Hwah?! O-Oh. What is it?"

"That's what I want to ask. I thought you agreed we should get out of here as

soon as we can? But you've just been standing there with a really scared look on your face like you're thinking about something. What happened?"

Zelos came back to his senses, back to the world of melted rock. He remembered the situation he was in.

"Oh. Right. We've finished mining, so let's get a move on and head back up."

"That sounds good, but...are you sure I'm not going to be a burden on you?"

"A burden? Why do you say that?"

"Because, well... I'm weak."

Zelos looked down at Christine, who was hanging her head dejectedly, and awkwardly scratched at his messy hair.

The two of them were in the dungeon's lowest layer. As they went up, they'd inevitably run into monsters somewhere—and they'd likely need to *fight* those monsters.

At Christine's level of strength, traversing these layers would be dangerous.

After a bit of careful thought, Zelos cast his gaze up to where the ceiling had been, and saw the higher layers that had appeared when the ceiling caved in.

"We should be able to get there pretty easily. As long as we go *that* way, that is."

"Huh? But how are you going to get up so high?"

Christine was looking at where Zelos was pointing: a passage to another layer, up above where the ceiling had been. In other words...

"W-Wait. Don't tell me you're going to *fly* there?"

"Do you have any *other* ideas?"

"I-I fell off a cliff just earlier, you know..."

"Hold on tight and you'll be fine. Come on, just count the spots on the ceiling and we'll be up there in no time! No time at all..."

"Um, I feel like your wording there sounds kind of suspicious..."

Having only just fallen off a cliff, she'd been traumatized by heights a bit.

Her expression had frozen as well, indicating her reluctance to get up there with flight magic.

“What, do you think your companions will be able to make it here instead? Maybe it’s safe *here*, for now, but there are going to be monsters on each layer along the way, you know?”

“B-But... It’s so high!”

“As long as you don’t struggle, we’ll get there quickly. Of course, that’s *if* you don’t struggle...”

Flight magic went against the laws of physics. It used the caster’s own internal mana to generate a force field to propel them, and only used the external mana from nature to supplement that propulsion, so it consumed mana fairly quickly. Furthermore, just supporting one’s own weight was about the best you could do under normal circumstances, so adding extra weight on top of that upped the mana consumption considerably.

“E-Even if we *do* get up there... I’ll be useless in a fight!”

“If it comes to that, I’ll lend you a special weapon. One that’ll kill any monster around here in a single hit. Heh heh heh...”

Zelos was talking about an enchanted weapon he’d made with his old party members. It held an excessive amount of destructive force—enough that just about any weaker monster that got hit by it would be obliterated.

If Zelos used it himself, it would be on the level of proper military equipment. But if the user was Christine, it would be much weaker—though still considerably powerful.

“Do I get any say in th—”

“Nope. Remember, right at this very second, those knights who were with you are probably going out of their minds trying to get to you, okay? If they haven’t already died in the process, that is...”

“Ngh...”

Still unable to make a decision, the girl looked up at the ceiling and prepared to...run. Zelos, left with no other choice, picked her up by force. Her body felt

surprisingly soft.

“Shadowraven’s Wings.”

“Aaaahhhh!”

Ignoring the girl’s screams, Zelos took off, zooming high into the air—and at an impressive speed.

Christine’s screams echoed throughout the dungeon’s vast bottom layer as Zelos held her in his arms, rising higher and higher into the air.

All he wanted was to get back as quickly as he could and create his appliances—but you had to feel sorry for poor Christine, who’d just gotten caught up in the whole thing. Looking back on the situation later, she would say, “The sky’s scary... I never want to fly again...”

The day had already given the girl a fear of heights, and Zelos was only making it worse.

It was a heartless thing to do—though he was entirely unaware that he was doing it in the first place.

*

After flying to a higher layer, Zelos and Christine continued to make their way back up through the mine.

Zelos made quick work of most of the monsters that appeared along the way, while Christine just followed along behind him. She’d already told him she’d be useless in a fight, but she really *was* weak.

For now, the two of them were resting in a sheltered area hidden among the rocks. Fortunately, Zelos had some firewood in his inventory and was able to use some of it to start a bonfire. It was time for lunch—albeit a bit of a late one.

“That should do it. By the way, Christine, do you not use magic?”

Zelos broke the silence between them.

Christine cast her gaze down, but she replied nonetheless, pouring her heart out. “I *can’t* use it. It looks like I just don’t have the talent for it; I can learn the spell formulas, but I can’t get them to activate. It still uses up my mana and

wears me out when I try, but I just don't have the aptitude for actually *casting* the spells..."

Zelos was getting a sense of déjà vu. He found it very likely that Christine was having the same problem as Celestina: she was struggling to use magic simply because the formulas she was using were flawed.

"I see... So, if you *could* use magic, then you'd want to learn how to, right?"

"Yes, if I could. But I can't. So many mages have told me."

As he puffed on a cigarette, Zelos pulled out several sheets of magic paper from his inventory.

All of them contained improved versions of the textbook spells used at the magic academy; they were the same spells Zelos had taught to Celestina and Zweit. He'd created these scrolls as a prototype of sorts after getting the suggestion that he could sell them, but he hadn't incorporated his erasure formula into them yet, so anyone could use them without restriction.

"What are these?"

"I can't make any guarantees, but these are spells that I think even you should be able to use."

"I don't have the talent for it, though..."

"You're in a life-or-death situation right now. It wouldn't hurt to at least give it a whirl, right?"

"Mmm... I guess you're right. I'll try it out, then."

Christine poured her mana into the scrolls, deployed their magic formulas, and etched those formulas into her mind. Then, the preparations done, she recited the incantation for one of them in a whisper.

"Burn before me, torchlight. Illuminate my path. Torch."

A small flame lit up in the palm of Christine's hand. Her eyes snapped wide with shock.

"Z-Zelos! I did it! A-And it didn't make me feel tired like the other formulas I tried to learn!"

“Good to hear. Oh—please give the scrolls back, though. They’re not something I want to be spreading around just yet.”

“I used magic! I did!”

“One of my students had the same problem, you see. Essentially, the version of the spell you just used is close to what they used in the old days.”

Zelos’s guess had been right: the reason that Christine’s magic hadn’t activated before was that the formulas she’d been using were flawed.

Even if the spell hadn’t successfully activated, the flawed spell formula had consumed her mana anyway—and tired her out. If anything, the spell not activating had put an even larger burden on her, and consumed more mana.

Ultimately, the root cause was the same as it had been for Celestina, so Zelos was able to solve the girl’s problem with ease.

As part of a family of knights, Christine wasn’t quite as hung up about magic as Celestina. But being able to use it would give her more options in life going forward. Not that she’d realized that herself yet...

“Um... Is this really okay? That was an original spell of yours, wasn’t it?”

“No, it’s just something I took from an academy textbook and tinkered with a bit. So you can use it however you’d like. After all, I’d feel bad for your knights if something were to happen to you.”

Christine’s knights would doubtless descend to the lower layers to search for her. And there’d be problems if she were injured when she met back up with them. That wasn’t the sort of hassle that Zelos wanted to deal with.

Christine was in a hurry to try and learn some more of the spells she’d been given. But almost before she’d even noticed, Zelos had pulled out several skewers and begun roasting them over the fire. They were starting to give off a mouthwatering aroma.

Slightly suspicious, she asked, “Um... I’ve been wondering, but what exactly is that meat you’re cooking there?”

“Who knows? I’ve got too much meat at this point; I’ve completely forgotten what’s what. Don’t worry, though. It’s safe to eat!”

The meat continued to cook over the fire, dripping with delicious-looking fat. When it was almost ready, Zelos added some salt and a pinch of spices, then held it back over the fire. Finally it was done, and Zelos handed one of the skewers to Christine. The savory scent whet her appetite.

Christine swallowed the saliva that she felt building up in her mouth, though she felt it was a little unrefined to do so.

And then, slowly, she bit into the hot meat. Sweet juices burst out, and the tender texture melted in her mouth; the meat's rich flavor overwhelmed her.

"I-It's delicious!"

That was all she could say. She hadn't eaten anything since she'd fallen down to the dungeon's lowest layer, and she was so hungry—which only made the skewer feel like even more of a gourmet delight.

"Oh, that's right!" The taste of the meat had finally reminded Zelos of what monsters it'd come from. "I think this meat was from a manticore and a wyvern... Oh, and a death mantis."

"Bmph! Gakh!"

Manticore and wyvern meats were some of the fanciest delicacies money could buy. They were incredibly rare ingredients—things that even nobles wouldn't often get to eat. Death mantis, meanwhile, wasn't even considered meat. Despite their size, they were *insects*—and not only had nobody in this world even *thought* of eating them before, they were infamous for being dangerous beasts with a brutal strength.

One thing was for certain: none of them were the sort of ingredients you could get your hands on easily. And perhaps a second thing too: nobody had eaten death mantis meat before. Well, aside from a certain middle-aged man who'd prepared the dish just now...

"Wh-What are you making me eat?!"

"Is there a problem?"

"These are all really high-end ingredients! And—*death mantis*?!"

"Yep. It's that white meat there. It's nice and sweet, right?"

It *was* tasty. If Christine hadn't known what it was, she would've simply passed it off as being some sort of incredibly delicious meat.

But now that she knew it was from a death mantis, she couldn't help but feel like she'd swallowed something that wasn't meant to be eaten.

"I-It *is* tasty, but..."

"At this rate, maybe the megaspider meat will be good too. Let's give it a try..."

"You're going to eat that as well? Are you sure you're sane?"

"Plenty of people eat monster meat; this really isn't any weirder than what they do, is it? It's all meat from dead creatures at the end of the day."

"Ugh, I suppose you're right, but..."

"If it tastes good—bon appétit! In fact, I think we should count ourselves lucky that we even have *anything* to eat in a situation like this, don't you?"

Zelos had grown remarkably over the course of the time he'd spent surviving in the wild. A lot of that growth had been him succumbing to his wild side; but regardless, he now had the sort of mental fortitude that would let him survive all by himself, even if the entire world fell to ruin. Christine, on the other hand, couldn't help but see the skewer in her hand as something truly bizarre. She spent a while like that, mulling over her worries...but eventually her hunger got the best of her, and she ate the rest of the skewer.

In the end, she even asked for seconds. It seemed like Zelos was right after all: *if it tastes good—bon appétit!*

*

Their meal finished, Zelos and Christine continued to walk back to the upper layers. But on their way, a monster appeared.

"A war ant, hmm? I guess we kill it. There's only one, after all."

"But it's Level—"

"Level 103, yes? Then that weapon I gave you should get the job done."

Zelos pointed to the weapon he'd lent to Christine earlier: the Azure

Dragonblade.

*

Enchanted Azure Dragonblade (Type 38 Modified Azure Dragonblade)

A formidable masterpiece of a weapon with increased cutting power. Forged by adding the perfect mix of materials from a selection of massive monsters. Sharp enough to cut steel in half by just touching it; dangerous to touch with bare hands.

Special effects:

Physical Enhancement, Increased Cutting Power, Increased Slashing Power, One-Hit Kill, Severing Strike, Integrated Offense and Defense

*

It's not showing the attack power this time. Maybe there's someone different in charge of giving the information?

Zelos had started to have doubts about his Appraisal ability. It was giving different results every time he used it, as if the information was being given on a whim.

It seemed like the laws of nature could be a little odd in this world. Though really, Zelos felt, the whole concept of getting "skills" seemed to be divorced from the laws of nature in the first place. The only explanation he could think of was that someone, or multiple someones, was managing it all.

"For starters, I'll make sure it can't move. I want you to take advantage of that and attack it."

"O-Okay. I'll give it my best shot."

Christine seemed to be feeling down in the dumps. She'd been thrust into one dangerous situation after another, so you could hardly blame her...though her

main reasons were the incidents with the flight magic and the meat skewers. Not that Zelos was aware of that.

She drew the Azure Dragonblade from its scabbard and began charging at the war ant.

“Plasma Bind.”

Zelos lazily cast a binding spell that paralyzed the war ant’s body with electricity, preventing it from moving.

Without hesitation, Christine charged in. She was showing good form with the sword—probably the results of all her training.

“Hi-yaaaah!”

THWUTCH!

The war ant was decapitated from about the middle of its thorax.

Perhaps the enchanted weapon was a little *too* powerful.

“H-Huh? What?! Why is it so strong?!”

The main culprits were the One-Hit Kill and Severing Strike skills attached to the weapon. Christine had just proved that the enchanted weapon was plenty dangerous even if used by a low-level beginner. Zelos didn’t want to *think* about what would happen if he used it himself.

Zelos took a moment to put his words together. “This weapon might be...a little too dangerous. I think I’ll seal it away once we’re out of here. Jeez...”

“Um, I’m kind of scared to be holding this thing... Just to be sure, *I’m* the one who did that just now, yes?”

“Yeah. I’ll have to be a bit more careful about making weapons in the future. I don’t even *know* what sort of ticking time bomb I could end up making, if I got carried away. Scary thoughts, scary thoughts...”

“‘In the future’? Are you saying you’ve been making weapons like this *without* being careful so far?!”

“Yes, and I’m reflecting on it now. Honestly, I do think I overdid things a bit. I wouldn’t say I *regret* it, though.”

While it had been within the context of a game, Zelos had made some truly fiendish weapons—and he was only now realizing the full weight of what he'd done.

Even a low-level person using this weapon could defeat a powerful monster five times their own level with a single attack. A single swing of the blade could very well spell disaster for the state of the whole world's military affairs. And if the wielder *did* use it to defeat a powerful monster, their level would of course go rocketing up.

"Hgyaaaah!"

The sudden surge of level-ups put Christine under tremendous strain. Her body forcibly put her to sleep to protect her mind from the pain of adjusting to her new, much higher level. If you could get through this with nothing but fatigue, you were lucky; if you were *unlucky*, you might not wake up for days. Christine was in the latter camp. Her body, unable to endure the pain, shut off her consciousness as soon as it began adjusting, and she slowly collapsed to the ground. Zelos hurried to grab her before she fell.

Indeed, Christine had fainted, right in the middle of the dungeon.

"I wonder just how much her level went up from that?"

Christine had been Level 20. Now, she was Level 81.

The distribution of experience points could differ a lot, depending on whether you fought alone or as a group. When you fought as a group, the experience points would be distributed among the members of that group, and the symptoms of your body optimizing for its new level would be kept to a minimum. But in Christine's case, the change was coming all at once.

That could be seen from Zelos's recent expedition to the Far-Flung Green Depths, when his students and the knights had leveled up bit by bit. *They* had gotten away with fatigue as their only symptom—but Christine was being racked with intense pain.

That being the case, it fell to Zelos to carry her. But...

"Isn't this just going to look like I've kidnapped her?"

Given how Zelos looked, anyone who saw him would probably think he was a criminal who'd kidnapped the girl. It just wasn't a good look. And at the moment, Christine was disguised as a boy.

That meant that Zelos could end up with a bad reputation in a *different* way as well—though there'd probably be some women out there who'd appreciate the sight.

A suspiciously dressed middle-aged man kidnapping a young boy... The optics weren't great.

Zelos turned pale. He wasn't sure he'd be able to live with himself if that sort of rumor started to get around.

"What to do, what to do..."

Really, though, Zelos only had two options. Either he pushed on or stayed where he was.

Ultimately, he chose the former, carrying Christine as he made his way back to the entrance of the mine. Saving a life took precedence over his reputation, after all.

As he walked, Zelos made an accidental discovery: Christine had a surprisingly ample chest. But he tried his best to stifle his mixed feelings and continue on—all the while preparing for the rumors that could very well result...

*

"These blasted ants!"

"Don't panic! That mage from earlier went to find Christine! She's probably safe."

"You *say* that, but how long's it been since he fell in there?! On the off chance something *has* happened, we..."

The knights' path had been blocked off by a group of giant ants.

Looking to protect their nest, the ants were threatening the knights, rubbing their sharp mandibles together to make noise. Since they didn't need to get food here in the dungeon, reproduction was their top priority, making them even more aggressive when it came to eliminating any intruders that entered

their territory. One side of the battle was fighting to protect their eggs; the other, to save their master.

At this point, the sun was probably setting outside the mine. But the knights couldn't simply call it a day and leave.

"Syle! Keep the ants to the left in check!"

"All right! We won't last long, though! Is Isart going to be fine by himself?"

"Corsa, help me clean up the ants on the right! Watch my back."

"Understood!"

"I'll cover Syle. Soctar, kill them as quick as you can!"

The knights split up into two groups, utilizing choke points to make the most of their swords and take down the giant ants.

Because of their massive bodies, the ants tended to get stuck in narrow spaces, and the knights were taking advantage of that to engage them.

The four of them were already exhausted, but they still had to save Christine. The late Viscount Edward had entrusted them with that duty, and they'd sworn to protect the girl—the successor of the Elwell family—no matter what it took.

All four of them had been orphans, and they knew full well that they'd probably have ended up as lowlives if Edward hadn't picked them up. That was just the norm in the impoverished slum they'd been living in, and they felt greatly indebted to the man who'd taken them under his wing.

This was why they were entirely willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of Christine, the daughter of that very man.

"Oh! They're over here! Surrounded by ants. Hey, misters, we'll back you up, okay? *Aqua Jet!*"

Iris, Jeanne, and Lena, who had been following along behind, joined back up with the knights, making the battle far easier.

"Jeez, can't you just calm down a bit?!"

"Yes—Zelos is with her, so she should be fine! Anyway, keep your eyes in front!"

Jeanne hacked into the giant ants with her longsword, while Lena targeted their joints with speed and precision.

“You’re going to help us? Thank you!”

“Course we’d help each other out in times like this, right? It’s what mercenaries do.”

It wasn’t what *all* mercenaries did, to be clear. But Iris’s group, at least, was one of *respectable* mercenaries.

“Less talking, more fighting! There are more coming from farther in. *Ice Blizzard!*”

A wind of about minus thirty degrees blew over the swarm of ants, freezing them solid. Jeanne, Lena, and the mercenaries then shattered the ice, smashing them into pieces.

“Damn, there are a lot. How long are they going to keep coming for?”

“If this place really *is* a dungeon, they can just breed forever.”

“I don’t even want to think about it. But either way, we’ve got to keep going.”

The knights were getting impatient. They wouldn’t be able to get to Christine and save her unless they got past this mass of ants. But there was practically no end to the things.

“Okay, calm down. Can you hear that?”

“Hear...what?”

“Wait! The ants are suddenly acting weird!”

All of a sudden, the giant ants were on high alert, scanning the area as if something had them worried. They were moving their antennae all over the place, and snapping their mandibles to communicate with each other through sound.

Clearly, they were panicking about something. The mercenaries and knights all realized that something was about to happen.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

A thunderous sound echoed through the tunnel, shaking the walls.

At the same time, a whirlwind—picking up speed as it moved through the narrow space—crashed into the people in the tunnel, threatening to knock them off their feet.

All at once, the giant ants fled to a different tunnel, disappearing from in front of the knights.

“Wh-What’s happening...?”

“I don’t even know what could have *caused* an earthquake like that. The mine had better not cave in on us...”

“Don’t jinx it. We can’t exactly run away, remember?!”

“Hey—look down the tunnel! It’s the mage!”

Through the mine dust, they could see the figure of a shady-looking gray-robed middle-aged man walking toward them.

And being carried on his back was the girl that they were sworn to protect.

“Lady Christine!”

“Hmm? Hey, you’re all together,” called Zelos, closing the distance between them. “By the way, is this the way to the exit? I’ve just been randomly going up so far.”

“First—is Lady Christine safe?!”

“She’s fine. She just lost consciousness due to leveling up a bit.”

Zelos left Christine with the knights. At long last, he could take a bit of a breather.

Around him, he saw Lena and Jeanne dismantling the giant ants, while Iris was collecting the magic stones that were left when the ants’ remains got absorbed by the dungeon.

Since you had to collect materials from monsters’ bodies before they were absorbed by the dungeon, the dismantling work was a battle against time. Still, it stung Zelos a little that nobody seemed worried about him. They were all completely immersed in their work; they were treating him like he wasn’t even there.

The whole thing made Zelos feel alienated and a little sad. All the cheat powers in the world couldn't save you from loneliness.

A chill wind blowing through his heart, Zelos moved to make his way out of the mine.

All the while, he heard the three women behind him chatter on happily.

Chapter 15: The Old Guy Heads Straight Home

Christine woke up in a simple wooden room.

Looking around, she saw a table next to the bed she was in, and an old dresser against the wall, haphazardly topped with an empty vase.

Still bleary-eyed, she gazed at the ceiling. Gradually, she started to get her bearings.

She had no memories of anything after defeating the war ant. Still, she understood that she was now in a room at the inn where she'd been staying until this morning.

"How did I get here? Oh—Zelos!"

The only answer that came to mind was that the suspicious-looking mage she'd met had brought her here.

Deciding she needed to thank him, Christine went to spring up out of the bed. But as she did, a sudden wave of dizziness assaulted her.

After her rapid level-up, she still wasn't quite back to normal, and exerting herself like that when her body hadn't finished adjusting only served to bring on a wave of dizziness. She ended up just slumping back down to the bed.

"Auww~..."

Letting out a quirky groan, Christine buried her head in the pillow.

Even if she mustered her strength and tried to stand, her fatigue got to her before she could get there. She was essentially unable to move.

"I can...thank him *tomorrow*, right?"

If she pushed herself too hard to go and thank him now, she could end up just requiring *more* help from him.

Besides, it was already dark, with nothing but moonlight to illuminate the night. The mage was probably asleep by now anyway, she thought. In which

case, she figured, her top priority should be to get whatever rest she could to let her body recover.

As she pulled the blanket back up over herself and closed her eyes, she could hear the lively laughing voices of people making merry in the tavern down on the first floor.

Nonetheless, after a short time, her exhaustion took over. Soon enough she was letting out quiet sleeping breaths in the room of the inn on the village outskirts.

She was falling back into a deep sleep.

*

When Christine opened her eyes the next morning, she immediately got changed and hurried out of the room.

She headed down the stairs and toward the tavern below, where she saw a number of mercenaries eating breakfast. Among them were people she knew—and while a little belated, it had finally started to sink in that she was safe now. Relief washed over her.

“You’re awake, Lady Christine! How are you feeling?”

“You had us so worried when you vanished like that!”

“Isart! Syle! I’m fine. Corsa, Soctar—it seems like you’re okay as well!”

“We’d go anywhere to save you, Milady!”

“Yeah! Well, we did get pretty panicked, though.”

Christine was relieved to see that her retainers were safe—but that wasn’t why she’d come here.

“Isart, where’s the man who saved me?”

“The mage? I haven’t seen him since he left you with us. I’ll go ask those women he was with.”

The young man, who seemed to be the leader of the knights, called out to the three mercenary women, who were sitting at a table up front and eating breakfast.

“Sorry to disturb you, but do you know where that mage from earlier went? Lady Christine says she really wants to give him her thanks.”

“Huh? The geezer, huh... Now that you mention it, we haven’t seen him for a bit, hey?”

“You’re right. I wonder if he’s still resting in his room?”

“Oh—didn’t you know? Mister went home. Last night.”

Three voices came back at once: “*What?!*”

“Hold on a second, Iris! When did Zelos even leave?”

“Yeah! I saw him eating here last night!”

“He finished eating, had a smoke, and then left. After the two of you said you were going back up to rest.”

“It takes half a day to get to Santor from here! Is he insane? And isn’t he worried that bandits might— No, of course not. I feel like the *bandits* should be worried, if anything.”

“Right? I can’t imagine any bandits taking *him* down. He came all the way back from the bottom layer of the mine without a scratch, y’know? There’s no way your average chump’d stand a chance against him.”

Zelos had left the village late at night, but as you might expect, the women weren’t exactly worried about him. Instead, he was so nonchalantly overpowered that they were inclined to think, “If there *is* someone who could kill him, I’d like to see it.”

It seemed like they were treating Zelos pretty heartlessly even when he wasn’t there.

“Did he say something before he left?”

“Hmm... I think it was something like, ‘Dealing with nobles is a pain, so I’m out of here’?”

“That means I can’t even offer him my thanks... Um, do you know where he lives or something?”

“Not a clue! Actually, wasn’t he, like, a nomad? Just living in inns or

something?”

The exchange left Christine feeling down. Her knights weren't sure what to say to her.

It wasn't unusual for mages to be self-centered types who gave no thought to other people, but Christine was still a little sad to hear he'd simply disappeared before she even got the chance to thank him. It had put a damper on what was otherwise a pleasant morning.

Nobody there knew where the middle-aged mage lived.

Jeanne, realizing that *someone* had to do it, heaved a sigh and tried to console the girl. “Mages being selfish is nothing new. Don't worry about it.”

“He saved my life, though. I really feel like I should at least thank him. Both as a person and as a noble...”

“This is Zelos we're talking about here, though. I don't think he'd be all that worried about it, you know?”

“Yeah. He seems to always be pretty laid-back, so I'm not sure you have to fuss over it too much, 'kay?”

Christine might've been desperate to thank Zelos, but with the man in question not around, that wish just wasn't going to come true. It had left her awfully depressed. However much the others tried to think up lines to console her, she only ended up feeling more and more down.

The middle-aged mage she was looking for had vanished from the village on a whim.

He'd flown the coop, but he hadn't bothered to clean up the mess he'd left in his wake. And by this point, he'd already arrived at the gate to the city of Santor, humming a tune to himself and smoking a cigarette as he went...

*

As a bit of a tangent, it wasn't long after this little incident that the abandoned mine in Arhaus was officially recognized as a dungeon.

Veteran mercenaries were sent in to properly scout the place—along with all the requisite formalities, of course—and ultimately, three months later, the

mine was recognized as a dungeon. The next few years would then see Arhaus begin to capitalize on the opportunity and spring back to life. By that point, the interior of the abandoned mine had grown even more, and various monsters had started to appear more frequently.

That growth came as a result of the monster massacre that Zelos had carried out down there with his annihilation magic—though not even he himself was aware of that. Having been turned to ashes in an instant, the monsters were absorbed very efficiently by the dungeon, serving as nourishment that granted it new power. Going forward, the dungeon would continue to expand, becoming a place of constant conflict between people and monsters—and an essential source of income. And so it would remain, until some day came when the dungeon core was eventually destroyed...

Over time, the mine earned itself a name: the “Great Labyrinth of Arhaus.”

*

Going back in time a little, to a tavern in Santor...

A bunch of nasty-looking men were gathered inside, ordering their favorite drinks, talking about all sorts of stupid things, and occasionally causing a nuisance by starting fights. This tavern frequently called on its guards to keep the peace.

A handful of mercenaries were gathered around a table, drinking to forget about their troubles from that morning. It was the man who'd picked a fight with Christine, as well as his comrades. After they'd been threatened by Zelos, they'd fled, and spent the last half a day coming to the city of Santor.

Just one of them still held a grudge about what had happened that morning and was doing his best to drown his sorrows with alcohol.

“That fucking mage... Just thinking about it now still pisses me off!”

“Yer *still* goin’ on about that? C’mon, give it a rest already...”

“That mithril sword was real beat-up anyway, wasn’t it? Ya couldn’t have used it even if ya *had* taken it, ya moron. Hah hah!”

“I wonder ’bout that. I still think that bastard coulda been trickin’ us.”

There were two reasons that this man thought the mage from earlier was lying. The first was that Zelos hadn't *proved* that he had the Appraisal skill. And the second was that when Zelos had threatened the mercenary with the tip of his sword, he'd told him to "give back the sword and get out of his sight."

You could say that you had the Appraisal skill, but nobody else could actually tell for sure. The only way to prove it was to have the person who claimed to have said skill appraise a bunch of different things.

And, if you followed the idea that Zelos had only pointed his sword at the mercenary to scare him, there was the real possibility that it had all just been an act. In which case, it would be highly likely that the thing about having the Appraisal skill was a lie as well.

Lying behind it all was Zelos's obviously shady appearance, which was driving the mercenary to view him—albeit mistakenly—as a liar.

"Look, even if yer right... The guy's no chump with a sword. That was no mage."

"Yeah. No idea when he even drew the damn thing."

"That's not the kind of guy ya should fight. / ain't gonna die like that."

"Shut it! I *know* all that already!"

The men were all low-ranking mercenaries. They hadn't gotten to where they were by diligently raising their levels, but by snatching rewards from other people. They joined merchants as "guards," but just followed along behind other stronger-looking mercenaries—keeping *themselves* well out of danger, naturally. In the mercenary world, they were called "leeches"... It was a similar story with monster subjugation; they'd wait until other mercenaries weakened the monsters they were after, then sneak in and steal the kill.

They thought of themselves as clever, but their behavior had earned them a bad reputation that prevented anyone from trusting them—and as a result, they found themselves unable to move up the ranks. Despite the fact that it was their own fault, they resented the mercenaries' guild, and had gotten into the habit of harassing other people behind the guild's back out of desperation. In short, they were common louts—the sort you'd probably be able to find

anywhere.

As they sat and drank, a man who'd been drinking at the bar came over to them.

He was a mage wearing a black robe.

"It sounds like you're talking about something quite interesting there. But do you really think that a mere strong weapon will make *you* stronger? Unfortunately, you're mistaken."

"*Mmm?* You tryin' ta pick a fight with us, bud?"

"Mercenaries who lost to a mage wouldn't stand a chance against me. Well, you've given me a good laugh, so I'll let you in on a little something."

"*Huh?* You're a mage too, aren't ya? And what's this little somethin'?"

"First, I have a question for you all: do you want to get stronger? If you can answer that for me, I'll tell you how you *can* get stronger. Stronger than anyone else. *That's my little something.*"

The mercenaries exchanged glances. The mage they'd met this morning had been shady enough, but this one was plenty shady in his own way, despite being better dressed. Even though they were inside, he had the hood of his robe pulled low, covering his eyes. Not to mention, he was saying he'd give them information just because he'd happened to overhear their conversation; you couldn't get much more suspicious than that.

"Oh! I can't just tell you for free, of course. I'd have to ask for a bit of payment too...though it seems like you might not have much money on you. So how about we settle on a drink? Yes, let's say a drink—and, well, you *did* make me laugh earlier, after all. Those things together can be your payment."

"Ya sure yer not just tryin' to get a free drink out of us?"

"How rude. Quite simply, I have something that I don't need myself, so I thought I'd pass it on to you. But if you're not interested, I can always give it to somebody else instead. Who knows—I might be able to get a good price for it."

The mercenaries looked at each other again. It seemed like the mage here was trying to foist something that he didn't need off onto them, and they didn't

know what exactly it was. Still, if they could get stronger, they'd be able to earn a lot of money. They were an underhanded lot, but their nasty ways had only made them all the more wary in life.

"If ya want us to agree... Ya gotta at least *show us* what yer gonna give us first, hey?"

Or at least, they were *usually* wary. It seemed like a little bit of liquid courage had caused them to jump on board with the man's offer without all that much thought.

"That's fair. Let me show you what I'm talking about, then. Let's see... Ah, here it is."

The man suddenly thrust his hand into empty space, seemingly pulled an item out of thin air, and handed it over to the mercenaries, leaving them stunned. Ignoring them, the man placed the item—an amulet inlaid with a dull black stone—on the table.

"Well, there you have it—I've shown you. Now, how about that drink? Oh, and to clarify—just *having* this won't do anything for you, by itself. I still need to tell you how to use it."

"*Tch...* Hey! Bring this mage some ale!"

Not long after the mercenary shouted out, a big-bodied middle-aged woman poured some ale into a wooden tankard and slammed it down onto the table. No, even "slammed" didn't quite do it justice; it was more like she banged it down onto the table with all her might.

The impact shook the whole table. However, not even a single drop of the ale spilled.

"I've got to say, I'm surprised this place hasn't gone under if the service is like that..."

"Yeah. It's a mystery to us too."

"The food here's good, at least. Even if the service is shit..."

"I hear she's still single, ya know?"

"She tried to pin me down once. Naked. It was terrifying..."

The rest of the men were silent. All of them sent a look of pity and compassion to the man who had just spoken. The incident had terrorized him enough that merely remembering it was enough to put him on the verge of tears, even now. The middle-aged lady in question had an impressively large build, with narrow eyes and a body just about round enough to win her a Guinness World Record. The floor creaked whenever she walked, and the men were curious as to how much exactly she weighed. To put it straight, she wasn't the sort of person they wanted coming on to them.

"W-Well, never mind her. So? How do ya use this thing?"

"Ahh, a free drink really *does* taste good. As for how to use it... You wear it, pour some mana into it, and it'll give you strength."

"Mind if we give it a try?"

"Go ahead. I don't need it."

The man grasped the amulet in his hand and poured what little amount of mana he had into it.

THA-THUMP!

As he did, he felt a torrent of power surging through his body, and a sense of ecstasy like nothing he'd ever felt before. His body grew hot, and he felt as if he was bursting with strength.

"Hah hah! This is *amazing*. I feel unstoppable!"

"Seriously? Gimme one too!"

"I've got more, you know. Three more, to be precise..."

The other three men responded together: "Give them to us!"

They pressed in on the mage. He gave a rather forced smile—as you'd expect, he probably wasn't thrilled to have them all up in his face—and handed each of the men one of the same amulets.

"Ah—and with that, I think it's about time. I have work to get to, so I'll be leaving you men to it."

"Huh? You're goin' already? We haven't even thanked ya yet!"

“That’s quite all right. My boss is going to be a pain if I’m late.”

“Guess mages have it tough too...”

“You’re telling me. Anyway, let’s meet again if we get the chance.”

“We’ll be earning big by then.”

The mage waved and left the table of mercenaries behind.

And as he left, he murmured in an awfully cold voice: “If you’re still around by then, that is...”

The mercenaries continued to fool around at the tavern until morning.

*

After leaving the tavern, the mage headed into a nearby alleyway shadowed by the buildings around it, and met up with a number of men who’d been waiting there. They seemed like dangerous ruffians who’d probably had some sort of military training.

“How’d it go?”

“Eh, I’d say it went well. The rest is up to you guys, okay?”

“I almost feel sorry for them. Bet they’ve got no idea they’re being used as test subjects in a human experiment.”

“Those piles of waste are going to give us the results we need, so at this point I’ll just get some sleep and wait. After all, it’s too dangerous to try and use *that* until we find out whether it’s actually usable or not. But if things go well, we’ll be able to mass-produce it.”

“Sleep? You’ve still got work left to do.”

The men gave him a suspicious look.

“Yes, depending on the report I get back from you folk. We might have to change our plans depending on the results, remember.”

“Look, we know you’ve got your own goals. That’s why you’re giving us your help, right?”

“Yes—though it does feel like I’ve been doing a lot of *giving* lately, without

getting anything in return. I've got a lot of other things I need to be doing right now, you know... We all want the same thing, so I expect you all to give it your best."

The man sighed. "I'm sorry. Just...wait a little longer."

"I look forward to hearing from you. The rest is up to you."

The mage walked off down the alleyway, his footsteps light. It was almost as if he didn't care at all about the men he left behind.

The men silently nodded to each other and disappeared into the dark, as if they'd erased their presences.

"They're trying to use me, I bet," murmured the mage to himself. "Well, I can't deny I'm doing the same thing to them... I don't really care how things turn out, as long as it gets *me* closer to my goal. Still, maybe I should go and see how things are going?"

He smiled cruelly—and then he, too, disappeared into the darkness.

All that was left in the alleyway was silent blackness.

*

By the time Zelos got back to Santor, the sun was already on its way up.

It should have been a nice, pleasant morning—but there was something *else* that had Zelos excited. *Very* excited.

I guess I'll make the dryer first. Then the threshing machine, then the fridge... Oh, and there was that too. I have the magimorph seed already, so that leaves the spirit essence information... If I'm going to be making an artificial egg cell, would it be best to use one from another species, I wonder? Dwarves...are all shaped like beer barrels and little girls. They're out, on an ethical level. Beastfolk...seem like they could be kind of ill-mannered, so that's a no as well. Which leaves me with the spirit essence information of a high elf, I suppose. It'd be nice if it was a woman, but that's not something I'll know until I make it, I guess. I just want a helping hand for managing the field, really. Well, I'll just slowly chip away at the whole making-a-homunculus thing; the more pressing problem for now is, how long does it take the rice here to grow? Since they're

originally weeds here, they've probably grown a fair bit these past two days, and my Appraisal did say it could be harvested seven times in a year, so...now that I think about it, is there nobody in this country going hungry? If there is, then...make rice your staple food already! Anyway, sake. I'll need to start by making koji, or else I won't be able to make sake—or miso, or soy sauce for that matter. O, all the gods and goddesses in the heavens, I beg you, grant me some sake! Some precious sake! Grant me passage to your holy garden of sake!

His head was filled with delight at his plans.

He couldn't get the thought of sake out of his mind.

"Anyhow, my first priority is to get the parts for my machines in order. I'll need them to make my sake, after all..."

His priorities revolved around sake. It seemed like spending the whole night walking along a highway had driven his mind in an even stranger direction than usual. And he *looked* strange too—a young guard stationed at the city gate had spotted him and was giving him a puzzled look.

After all, a clearly suspicious-looking old guy was muttering to himself out in front of the city gates. Of *course* it'd raise some doubts. It was only natural to suspect Zelos, especially since he was just loitering in front of the gates without actually coming through.

Eventually, a group of several guards walked up to Zelos.

"You. Mage. Would you mind coming with us to the guardroom? We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Hmm? Me?"

"Who else is there? Of *course* I'm talking to you. You're acting suspicious right out the front of the city."

"You say that, but... I mean, I know how I look. I seem plenty suspicious even when not doing anything."

From an outsider's perspective, Zelos looked every bit like someone who *should* be apprehended. And he was aware of that himself.

"Your appearance is one thing, but I'm talking about your *behavior*! Anyway,

that's enough from you—come with us!”

“Hang on! Wait! Let me explain. You’ll understand.”

“Oh, we’ll be making sure you explain, don’t you worry. Now, hurry up and get walking!”

“Will you be giving me some breakfast? I walked here from Arhaus overnight, so I’m really quite hungry at the moment. I’d like some toast and some eggs, please. Scrambled eggs, specifically.”

“Damn, this old guy’s got some nerve!”

And so Zelos was marched along by the guards. It was only three hours later that he would finally be released.

It should go without saying that Zelos managed to get a proper breakfast out of the situation—on the pretense that the arrest was groundless, of course, and that he deserved some compensation.

*

On his way home, Zelos stopped by the magic tool shop to sell off some magic stones.

He’d been here just once before, also to sell magic stones, but it seemed like the storefront had undergone a rather fancy, feminine transformation since then. Honestly, it made Zelos rather hesitant to go inside. This clearly wasn’t the sort of shop a man could enter easily.

“Last time I was here, it had those real strong horror vibes, and that over-the-top creepy look... What *happened* here?”

The storefront had previously looked like a witch’s dwelling, but now it had done complete a one-eighty, and looked almost like a café now. In fact, it wouldn’t have been much of a stretch to say it looked like a *maid* café. That was how much of a shocking before-and-after it was.

Zelos hesitated to head inside, feeling his usual suspicious getup would look even more out of place in there. But as he pondered over it, an employee wearing an awfully frilly maid outfit popped her head out.

Zelos realized he’d seen this employee before. Yes—she’d been a *rude*

employee, wearing glasses with distinctively round, large lenses. Her name was Kuhti.

“Oh!” she said. “You’re... Wait, what was your name again?”

“I’m not sure I’m enough of a regular to be telling you my name yet, am I? Anyway, what’s *happened* to this place?”

“Another one of the manager’s whims. She was saying, ‘We should change the ambience of the store to be more welcoming for our customers’...”

“Took her long enough. Anyway, this is too *much* of a change! You can’t even tell it’s the same place anymore.”

“The builders from Hamber Construction worked really hard on it~!”

An image of Nagri floated into Zelos’s mind, the dwarven craftsman flashing him a big grin and giving him a thumbs-up.

The dwarves worked fast. And they kept to their construction deadlines.

Not to mention, the very next day after they finished a job, or perhaps that *same* day, they’d head right off to an even more bustling worksite. They weren’t the sort who liked to dawdle around.

“I remember him saying he had to get to his next job, but... It was *here*, huh?”

“By the way, what are you here for today? We don’t buy stolen magic stones—you know that, right?”

“You’re *still* going on about that? Why, you’re downright *eager* to treat me like a thief, aren’t you?”

“Yes! Very eager.”

Kuhti was an unusual employee; the sort who would throw ludicrous accusations at her customers with a smile.

Zelos figured that if he kept interacting with her long enough, he’d end up just having more false charges of one sort or another thrown at him. So he decided to ignore her.

“Is the manager here?”

“She is, but she was up late last night in a staring match with a pile of

accounting work. I think she's asleep at the counter?"

"You came out of the store just now, didn't you? Are you saying you didn't actually see her?"

"I did see her! She was drooling in her sleep~"

Kuhti had a habit of extending her vowels sometimes. It seemed she and Zelos had a conversation going, at least, but there was a bit of a discrepancy.

"Well, whatever's fine by me as long as you'll buy my magic stones. I ended up with more than I was expecting to get."

"So you stole them from somewhere again, did you? Hand yourself in!"

"All right, then... Let's get you reported to the manager. I think it's about time she fired this nuisance of an employee."

"Manager~! We've got a customeeeeer~!"

As if nothing had happened, Kuhti changed the subject and headed straight into the store, reporting to her manager, Belladonna.

Heading inside with a tired expression, Zelos saw that the *inside* of the store looked fancy now too. It was the sort of design that made his middle-aged man's head hurt. The shop was decorated with stuffed toys here and there, and there were lace curtains. Flowers had been set up too, albeit artificial ones. It was just overall off-the-charts levels of girly.

When he was last here, at least the *inside* of the store had been normal. But this time, the interior was just as pink as the exterior.

"Manageeeeer! Wake uuuup! We've got a customeeeeer! Miss Candyyyy!"

"Who was that?! Who just called me by my real name?! I'm *Belladonna*! It's my soul name!"

Leaving aside the question of why she'd taken her "soul name" from a poisonous plant, it seemed like the manager had a complex over her given name and was running the shop under an alias instead. For a mage, and especially one who looked like a high-class lady of the night, she apparently had a very cute name.

You could probably say that her name was a good match for the shop's new look—even if her appearance was still *less* of a match.

“Manager? We’ve got a customer! The thief from the other day.”

“She’s still talking about that? How about you fire this rude employee of yours already?”

“Oh—welcome back, darling. It’s been a while since the last time you came here, hasn’t it? What happened?”

“Manager, talking like that makes you sound like some sort of...*butterfly of the night*, you know~?”

“‘Butterfly of the night’? Why, that doesn’t sound appealing to me at all. Besides, wouldn’t that just be a moth? A temptress, seducing men by leaving the scent of her perfume in her path, like a moth scattering its scales... That’s not who I am.”

Internally, Zelos was thinking, *No, that sounds like the perfect way to describe you*. But he’d never say it.

As for why—the manager in question was glaring in his direction with an incredibly upset look on her face. She had a surprisingly sharp intuition.

“Are you here to sell magic stones again?”

“Yes. But I’ll have some companions stopping by later with stones of their own as well, so I don’t want to sell so many that I drop the price.”

“Just how many monsters did you defeat? Though honestly, I’m scared to ask...”

“Sorry, but can I get you to run the numbers on your end? Most of the stones I have are from worms and spiders.”

“Did you go to the abandoned mine in Arhaus? Let’s see, then... How about fifty of the worm stones, and twenty of the spider stones?”

She was willing to buy fewer than Zelos had expected. He had easily at least ten times that many, in magic stones alone—and he had no way of using them, so he was troubled by how much they were piling up. For some reason, his status screen displayed an “automatic collection” command, which collected all

of the magic stones from monsters that Zelos defeated. It was probably a holdover feature from when Zelos had been just a character in a game. Here, that feature had seemingly become a skill, and activated all by itself to automate the process of collecting magic stones.

Zelos had only realized that when he was being held in the guardroom earlier.

“I suppose that works. We have a deal.”

“Hmm? I haven’t mentioned a price yet.”

“I trust you on that. Even just the fact that you’re buying them off me at all is a help.”

Zelos wasn’t obsessed with money. He was too busy being obsessed with sake, after all.

Once he’d sold the magic stones to the manager for her asking price, he took his small sum of money, bought some deep-fried meat pies from a food stall on the street, visited what had become his usual tobacconist to stock up on cigarettes, and headed home.

“Ah... I need a portable ashtray too, don’t I? I’ve been forgetting my basic manners this whole time.”

It had taken Zelos a while to realize: whenever he’d been smoking out and about, he’d been littering his cigarette butts. He had, indeed, forgotten his manners.

He himself hated adults who didn’t uphold basic rules of etiquette... But nonetheless, he couldn’t kick his smoking habit.

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After a meandering walk, Zelos had made his way into Santor’s old town. He was just out in front of the church.

Zelos’s house was just down a narrow path that had been newly paved next to the church, and looked out onto the field at the church’s rear.

I’M DYING! IT’S ALL GOING BLACK... GAKH!

As he looked over, he could see the orphans there, full of energy as they

spent another day pulling out mandrakes.

The mandrakes were screaming with everything they had. But humans could get used to even the most absurd of things, and both the children and Luceris had already grown immune to the plants' mental attacks by this point.

To be precise, the children had been perfectly fine with them right from the beginning. But of course, being children, they'd gotten somewhat bored by now, and they weren't just pulling out the mandrakes for fun anymore.

Zelos wondered whether getting used to that sort of thing meant they'd all lost something important to their humanity, somehow.

"Oh! It's Pops!"

"Heeeey! Pops!"

"Got any presents for us?"

"Gimme meat! Meeeeaaaat!"

As soon as the children saw Zelos, they ran over to meet him. Though they were really all just looking for souvenirs.

"I do have some presents, yes. Deep-fried meat pies."

"Yaaaay! Thanks, Pops!"

"Yeah, thanks! C'mon, let's hurry up and eat!"

"Danke, Pops."

The last of the orphans was breathing heavily. "Meat. It's *meat*! Ehe heh heh... That should stop the cravings for a while..."

The children took the paper bags in their hands and ran off to the church, full of energy. Also, while it was hardly important, Zelos was incredibly curious about where that last kid had learned that sort of language from. Was there an adult in the area with some...concerning symptoms of sorts, perhaps?

"Hey! Don't be rude!" Luceris turned to Zelos. "Sorry, Zelos. And...welcome back."

It was a completely normal phrase, but for a moment, it left Zelos lost for words.

“What is it?”

“Ah, no... I was just thinking, it’s nice. Having somebody say ‘welcome back’ to you like that... Well, uh, I’m home, Luceris. I’m sorry if I worried you.”

Having spent so long living alone, Zelos was feeling incredibly pleased from just her simple greeting.

“It’s only polite to greet people—and it’s normal to be worried about someone you know, isn’t it?”

“It might be normal, but some people can really take it to heart. Especially when you’ve been single as long as I have.”

Even back on Earth, Zelos hadn’t had anyone to welcome him when he got home.



He'd head into a dark room, turn the lights on, and watch TV while getting dinner and a bath ready by himself. That was how he'd come home every day. If he wasn't feeling up to it, then there'd be some days when he didn't do anything at all—but even then, he probably wouldn't have felt lonely if there had been someone there beside him. Playing online games had been his hobby, but it was his loneliness that had played a large part in turning that hobby into a *routine*.

"If it's something as simple as that, then I'm happy to talk to you anytime."

"I might start to get the wrong idea from that, you know? Especially if a beautiful woman like *you* comes up and talks to me all the time; I'd be over the moon."

"There you go again... Are you teasing me?"

"No, no, I'm actually fairly serious. Anyway, I don't want to talk for too long and get in the way of your work, and I have a lot of things I want to get done myself now that I'm back, so I'll excuse myself, if you don't mind."

"You must be tired. If there's anything you need, feel free to ask me, okay? We're neighbors, after all."

"If something happens, I'll gladly take you up on that."

Luceris saw Zelos off, watching as he walked away with a spring in his step.

Age gap or no, she was interested in him—and now that he was back, she breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

"I'm so happy he made it back safely..."

"That's what they call love, Sister."

"You're still not gonna admit it? You're a stubborn one, aren't you?"

"How 'bout you start being honest with yourself and just do him?"

"Do him in? Like, kill him? And make him into meat?"

The kids had come back to Luceris before she'd realized, and started giving her...advice, if you could call it that.

"Really, where did you even learn to speak like that? You were all normal not

too long ago...”

“Some old guy in the neighborhood.”

“A young man in an alley.”

“A tavern owner.”

“A man who hides from people, and a thin old guy who buys stuff from him sometimes.”

The old town clearly wasn’t the best environment for raising kids.

Starting this day, Luceris would rack her brains about the children’s upbringing more than ever before.

She was doing her best to improve the environment for them, but it was just that rough a place. Moreover, children were terribly good at adapting to their environment. It would be up to Luceris to shape how they ended up going forward.

Extra Chapter: A Day in the Life of Luceris

Luceris was an early riser. First thing in the morning, she would head to the market to buy fresh vegetables and other ingredients, which she would then use to prepare breakfast for the orphans.

Winter was one thing, but you could never count on ingredients to last long in summer. So she had gotten into the habit of going to buy fresh ones early in the morning, whatever the circumstances.

Root vegetables would last for a decent while, but things like leafy greens would have insects going after them straightaway, and they'd rot if you didn't eat them quickly. Fortunately, there was a field behind the church now, so Luceris would be able to harvest vegetables from there and use them on the same day. But the field had only been set up about two weeks ago, so for now, most of it wasn't ready to harvest.

About the only thing that *was* ready to harvest was a type of medicinal plant. But that particular type—the mandrake—was worth a lot of money, so it was very much *not* something you wanted to use in cooking, even by accident.

The money they'd gotten from selling the mandrakes had already allowed for considerable improvements to the orphans' diet. But the valuable plants had also lured in thieves trying to steal them almost every night—thieves who would then get captured by local residents, providing those residents with a small income themselves when they handed the thieves in. Luceris wasn't aware of any of this, but she *had* noticed the local residents expressing a lot of gratitude to her lately for some reason.

Leaving that aside, even the fastest-growing vegetables could be divided into those that were hardy and those that were not. And those in the latter group would wind up losing out to the former and dying. It could be hard to get vegetables in a field to grow how you wanted.

Today, as on any other day, Luceris had gone out to the market for her morning shopping, and she was almost back at the church.

VWOONG! FWOOSH!

A girl was swinging a wooden sword, cutting through the air with an impressive sound.

She had long ears, and green hair that was tied together into a ponytail behind her head. Her clothes had an Eastern look to them, and her vibe was perhaps better described as dignified than cute. She was an elf—specifically, a *high* elf.

The girl continued to swing her wooden sword with single-minded devotion.

“Kaede! Doing your morning practice?”

“Sister,” she replied brusquely. “Yes—I spend the entire day inside, and so I must continue my training when I can, to prevent my body from growing weak.”

“Sorry. I’d really like to let you play outside, but...”

“I understand. My appearance could cause lowlifes to come here and target me should I be seen, correct? That is why I continue to train—so that I might protect myself. The only way to deal with such villains is to cut them down.”

Kaede could be an aggressive girl. Luceris had ended up looking after her at the request of Head Pastor Melratha, a middle-aged female pastor to whom Luceris felt indebted from her own upbringing. It seemed like the girl had some issues—Luceris still didn’t know all of the details. At any rate, when she’d agreed to look after her, she hadn’t known she was going to be a high elf...

Elves were targeted in lots of different lands, and high elves in particular were so rare that slave traders would do anything they could to get their hands on one. Rumors spoke of slave collectors out searching with bloodshot eyes for high elves...but Kaede, who had been born in the East, had a slightly rosier complexion than the average high elf.

Most elves were either mages or hunters, but Kaede wielded a sword—and despite being only still a girl, she possessed an excellent talent with it. Anyone who carelessly tried to abduct her would likely end up having the tables turned on them.

Especially since she was the sort to talk big about how “the sort of swine who would kidnap others had no worth but the satisfaction one might earn by cutting their meat from their bones.”

“Kaede... However bad someone is, you can’t just kill them like that, okay? Life is precious.”

“We live in a world where the strong prey on the weak. Devouring those weaker than oneself is simply the way of life. You should be more prepared for that yourself, Sister, should you not? It would not be unusual for us to be attacked at any moment.”

“There you go again... Nobody would get anything out of attacking *me*, you know? It’s not like I have any riches to my name.”

“But they *would* get something out of it. Are there not scum out there who lust for your body?”

“K-Kaede? Where’d you learn to speak like that?!”

“From Ange and the others.”

Ange was one of five children under Luceris’s care, and she and Kaede were the only girls among the five. She was an energetic, confident girl with red hair.

Luceris wept at the thought that a girl like that was picking up that sort of knowledge.

She didn’t know whether she was teaching the children poorly, or whether it was the environment they lived in that was teaching them such unnecessary things. But they *were* learning those things, one way or another; that much was undeniable.

Unable to tell where things were even going wrong, Luceris could do nothing but shed tears, frustrated by her own powerlessness.

Teaching really was a hard job.

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Once she’d finished her breakfast with the children, Luceris prayed at the church’s chapel, then went out into town to do training in the name of church work.

Effectively, she found injured folk in town and offered to heal them for a paltry amount.

Luceris was somewhat well-versed in medicine, and sometimes she would create medicines for the ill and provide them for their treatment. But until lately, she had just about given up on that, as she hadn't had the money to buy medicinal herbs.

"I can't thank Zelos enough. Our lives are easier now, and we've been able to buy the furnishings we need. I'll need to give my thanks for meeting him if I don't want the gods to punish me~!"

Luceris had been in a great mood lately, and the numerous men in love with her were knocked out by a single glimpse of her saintly smile. Not that *she* had the slightest idea what was going on.

Ever since she was a child, Luceris had been determined to return the favor to the orphanage that had raised her. And so, at the age of thirteen, she had gone to an abbey in the Holy Land of Metis, completed her training there with outstanding results without ever getting the time to worry about whether others were looking at her, and returned to Santor.

Having been abandoned at birth, Luceris had never known parental love. But she *did* know the dedication of the priests who had raised her at the orphanage that whole time.

Her hopes to repay that favor, even just a little, had set her down the path of becoming an apprentice priestess. But she wasn't actually as much of an ardent believer as you might expect. More so than the existence of the gods, she believed in the morals laid out by the Faith of the Four Gods's doctrine, and in the kindness within people's hearts.

In short, Luceris was a priestess because the people who had raised her *just so happened* to be part of the Faith of the Four Gods; she wasn't all that interested in the religion's ideas about the gods themselves. Publicly, she followed the doctrine of the church like a proper priest, but her only goal was to save as many orphans as possible from the situation she had been in as a child. Her only real "god" was the virtue of the human heart.

By now, she had come of age, and the orphans were teasing her about having

fallen for a certain middle-aged mage. She was still yet to accept that herself, though. She could be surprisingly stubborn at times.

Her lifestyle was still far from affluent, but she was doing her best to raise the orphans. And, of course, she also did things like providing healing for street children who had no relatives.

“All right! Your wound should be healed now.”

“Thanks, Miss.”

“You watch out for yourself, okay? And if you hurt yourself again, you can ask me for help whenever you need it.”

“Kay. Got it.”

As usual, Luceris was starting off by healing children who had no relatives to care for them and using potions to recover her mana when it got low.

Her top priority was the children who were in the same situation she’d been in herself; treating the other townsfolk would come after that. Seeing children without any parents, trying their hardest to simply *survive*, reminded her of how she had once lived.

She could remember being abused and having stones thrown at her when she was younger. And that knowledge of how tough things could be drove her to work hard at doing good deeds for orphaned children. Now that Zelos had told her the holy magic used by priests was no different from all the other types of magic used by mages, she wasn’t holding back. While she called herself an apprentice priestess, she had also begun seeing herself as a *mage*.

If the rest of the Faith of the Four Gods found out about that, she would doubtless have been labeled a heretic.

“Hi, Granny. It’s been a while. Have you been feeling all right lately?”

“Oh, my, if it isn’t little Lu! I’ve been feeling good, yes—all thanks to the medicine you gave me last time I saw you!”

“Don’t push yourself too hard, though, okay? And make sure you take your medicine if you’re feeling bad.”

“Oh, I’m fine! I don’t plan to kick the bucket until the old codger dies first.”

The old lady let out a cackle.

While she wasn't Luceris's *actual* grandmother, she had been helping Luceris out since the latter was a child, and she had the sort of impressive laugh you wouldn't expect from someone her age.

She'd had a reputation as a gutsy old lady for what felt like forever. Luceris could remember getting food from her when she sneaked out of the orphanage all those years ago.

"Still, who would've thought that little tomboy Lu would turn into such a wonderful lady... Have you found yourself a good man yet? Bet you're popular by now, at least!"

"I-I don't have anyone like that!"

"Hmm. Sounds like you do have your eye on one, though, eh? Is he older than you?"

Old ladies had scarily good intuition. Their years of experience made them formidable.

Still, Luceris managed to somehow dodge the old lady's needling questions, say goodbye, and promptly run away.

People who knew about her past were a pain in more ways than one. Some of the elderly people she knew would try to introduce their grandsons to her—in fact, on her way to meet this very old lady today, she'd had three others each try to arrange a meeting between her and their grandsons with marriage in mind.

She'd made it through, though, and now, she'd arrived before an inn along a major street in the new part of town. Her face still felt hot from all the teasing.

I mean, I do find myself a little interested in Zelos for some reason—but that doesn't necessarily mean it's love...

Luceris didn't know when to give up.

"Oh, Luceris! Good timing!"

"Hyawhah?!"

Surprised, she turned around, and saw a woman with chestnut brown hair. It was Lena—the mercenary companion of Jeanne, who was Luceris’s longtime close friend.

Luceris had treated her wounds many a time, and knew her well.

“Wh-What’s happened, Lena?”

Lena paused for a moment, sizing her up. “What’s happened to *you*, Luceris? Your face is all red. Have you caught a cold?”

“I’m just...surprised, since you called out to me so suddenly. Anyway, what about you?”

“Oh, that’s right. Actually, it seems like Jeanne’s caught a bad cold... They say idiots don’t catch colds, but she managed to anyway. In *summer* too.”

“Don’t be mean, Lena. People can get sick at any time of year.”

“I’m just kidding. The thing is, it seems like all of the doctors are taking the day off today, so I was looking for someone who knows a lot about medicine—and that’s when I saw you. You *do* know a fair amount about that sort of thing, right?”

Lena was the companion of Luceris’s close friend, but she seemed a little off-kilter. Still, Luceris thought, the very fact that she was out running around the city for Jeanne’s sake at this very moment meant that she must be a kind person at heart.

“I know a little bit, but...what condition is she in?”

“A cough, a fever, a sore throat, nausea, fatigue, and a bit of swelling, I think.”

“I *think* it’s a cold, then... Swelling, though? That’s not something I’ve heard of happening with a cold before...”

“Well, I *did* strip her naked in our room at the inn and just leave her like that after we got drunk yesterday. Should I not have done that?”

“What... What were you *doing* yesterday? Why did you strip her naked?”

“Hmmm...” Lena paused for a moment, thinking. “A bit of a prank, I guess? She just looked so cute when she was sleeping...”

“What was that pause for just now?” Luceris sighed. “It’s the same inn as usual, right? I don’t have enough medicinal ingredients on me right now, so I’ll go there after I buy some.”

“Thanks. She’ll have someone nursing her until then, at least. By which I mean Iris.”

For a moment, Luceris had her doubts about whether Lena really *was* a good person or not. The reason was that when Lena left, Luceris saw her head into a *different* nearby inn—with a mighty spring in her step, for some reason.

Luceris inferred that it probably had something to do with that “bad habit” of Lena’s that she’d heard about before from Jeanne. But Luceris didn’t know what that habit actually was. Perhaps it was something that she was better off *not* knowing.

“Anyway, what’s important now is to get some more medicinal herbs. I wonder if the shop’s still open?”

Stores that dealt in herbs and the like tended to run low on stock rather quickly, often leading them to close early.

There was high demand for medicinal herbs, after all, with mages and apothecaries in particular buying them in bulk.

Even doctors had a difficult time getting enough medicinal herbs, leaving them unable to prepare medicines at times. Demand was just so high that supply had a difficult time keeping up.

Luceris set off in a hurry toward the medicinal herb shop.

She knew her friend was suffering, and she didn’t want to waste even a moment getting to her side to treat her.

It should go without saying that she tripped and fell over along the way.

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“Chicgrass, coolseed, and...if she has nausea, I’ll need stoma walnuts as well. Is the swelling due to heat, I wonder? It’s not a symptom I usually see in colds around this season...”

Luceris was buying ingredients for a medicine at the medicinal herb shop. But

she was starting to realize that they were short on stock.

“Um, would you happen to have any river halfhead oil?”

“Nah. Sold right out. Just earlier.”

“That’s not good. I need it for something I’m about to make...”

“Hey, shopkeep, have you got any alumiragrass drops and faerie gems in sto — Hmm? If it isn’t Luceris! Fancy seeing you here.”

“Zelos?! Why are you at the medicinal herb shop?”

Standing there was a middle-aged mage in a gray robe. He was a benefactor of the orphanage, and the orphans had grown attached to him—or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he’d tamed them with food. He was holding several bags; apparently he was in the middle of shopping.

“I was thinking of making a few potions, you see. Mana potions, specifically. But I started to run short on ingredients, so I thought I should come here to get some more. What about you, Luceris?”

“My childhood friend’s stuck in bed with a cold, so I thought I’d make her some medicine. But it seems like the ingredients are already sold out, so I’m not really sure what to do...”

“Hmm... What ingredients? I might have some lying around.”

“River halfhead oil. It’s a key ingredient for making cold medicine, but...would you happen to have any?”

“More than I could ever need. I ended up overfishing for it at one point, and I don’t actually have any use for it... Aha ha ha.”

“‘Overfishing,’ you say... Anyway, would I be able to take a bottle of it? I promise, I’ll repay the favor!”

“Don’t worry about it. Cold medicine, though? In this season? Just what sort of symptoms does that friend of yours have? I’ve got to say, I’m a little curious...”

“The same symptoms as a regular cold, except that her body feels a bit swollen as well, apparently. I haven’t actually seen her yet, so I can’t say much

more than that...”

“Hmm. The same symptoms as a cold? From memory, there’s an infection that can pass from monsters to humans, and this is just about the time of year that it goes around most often. You can catch it if you’re attacked by an infected monster; if that *is* what’s happened, she won’t be cured with just cold medicine, you know?”

“What?!”

Luceris had never heard of that sort of illness before. Infections were the sort of thing that most doctors here denied the existence of, obstinately insisting that there was no such thing as creatures invisible to the human eye. And here was a mage, brazenly claiming that such dubious-sounding illnesses did in fact exist... But for some odd reason, Luceris couldn’t bring herself to believe that he was lying.

“Wh-What sort of illness are you talking about?!”

“A fever, coughing, nausea, fatigue, sore throat, swelling... Then a rash starts to appear, and the person doesn’t have long left after that. Their body gradually starts to turn purple, the inside of their body necrotizes, and eventually, they die. It’s about three days from infection to death. Well, I have the cure for it; would you like me to give it to you? You might not need it anyway, but just in case.”

Luceris paused for a moment, absorbing the information. And then: “That’s...probably a good idea. Can I please have it? Just on the off chance that that *is* what she has? I promise, I’ll do whatever I can to pay you back!”

“Really, you don’t need to. It’s a good opportunity to clear out my inventory—even if I kept it around, I wouldn’t be using it. They’re pills, specifically. I’ll give you about a bottle’s worth. They’d work as cold medicine too, actually, but costwise... Well, let’s just say it wouldn’t be the most cost-effective way of using them. Aha hah.”

“A-Are they really that expensive?!”

“Well, I usually wouldn’t use them if I knew it was just for a cold. But seriously, don’t worry about it~”

As he spoke, Zelos casually pulled the medicine out of what seemed like thin air. In his left hand, he now held a little bottle packed full of pills. It was a strange sight.

“You should probably get going to that friend of yours, right? The sooner you treat her, the sooner she’ll get better.”

“R-Right! Thank you so much!”

Luceris ran off toward the inn.

Behind her, she heard voices saying things like “If ya had that many ingredients, then ya don’t really need to buy anything at *my* place, do ya?” and “Yer crazy, man! Yer going into the Far-Flung Green Depths the day after tomorrow, right?! Wouldn’t ya wanna bring all sorts’a healing potions with ya?!” But for now, she was more worried about Jeanne than anything else, so she didn’t have it in her to turn around and listen.

She hurried toward Heaven’s Hall, the inn where Jeanne was staying—and jostled quite a few people along the way...

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Heaven’s Hall was an inn that catered mainly to mercenaries.

Luceris asked at the counter for directions to Jeanne’s room, then made her way there as quickly as she could.

She took a moment to catch her breath in front of the door, then knocked.

“Come in... Oh, Luceris! *God*, I’m glad you’re here! Jeanne’s suddenly...”

“Please calm down, Iris. Anyway, where’s Jeanne?”

As she headed into the room and saw Jeanne in bed, Luceris fell silent.

Jeanne’s forehead and arm had erupted in rashes, and her skin was starting to turn purple.

Is this...an infection?! It really is what Zelos was talking about...

“Ugh... Is that...you...Lu?”

“Please, don’t expend the energy! Here, I’ve brought some medicine...”

“Sorry...for worrying you...”

Luceris hadn't expected to need the medicine she'd received from Zelos this soon.

She took out a few pills from the bottle, poured some water into a cup, and slowly helped Jeanne to drink it together with the pills.

Fortunately, the pills were tiny, making them easy to swallow. Jeanne took the medicine and fell right back to sleep.

On closer look, Luceris saw with relief the pained expression Jeanne had been wearing earlier was starting to relax.

Amazing... I've never seen a medicine do anything like this before. Just what kind of person is Zelos?

It seemed like Zelos had created a medicine with magic—and a surprisingly effective one at that. But Luceris had never heard of such a powerful medicine. She'd studied medicine herself at the abbey, but this was just on an entirely different level.

“Uuuugh... Jeanne, are you really going to be okay? *Sob...* And— And Lena's gone off somewhere, and I don't even know where, and—”

“Iris— Do you know when Jeanne last got injured by a monster? Apparently this is an infection of some sort.”

“An infection?! Um... Two days ago, maybe? Then we went to a tavern to celebrate finishing the job, and Lena stripped Jeanne naked, and... I-I can't say the rest! For Jeanne's dignity!”

What were you doing, Lena?! What reason could you possibly have had to take Jeanne's clothes off?!

Lena's eccentric behavior aside, it seemed as though Jeanne had indeed contracted an infection due to being attacked by a monster.

And that was only making Luceris all the more interested in Zelos—who'd been able to correctly diagnose Jeanne just by hearing about her symptoms, and given a medicine to heal her for free.

“It really *is* working super well, huh? Her condition's stabilizing really fast...”

No, she's getting better, even. Did you make that medicine yourself, Luceris?"

"Unfortunately, this is just something someone gave to me. I just happened to meet up with a mage I knew earlier... All I did was mention Jeanne's symptoms to him, but he knew what to do just from that, and he gave me this medicine for free. He's an amazing person."

"He diagnosed it just from that, huh? He *must* be amazing, yeah. Almost sounds like something one of the Destroyers would do."

"Who are *they*? That sounds like a bit of a scary nickname..."

"The Destroyers! They're a whole party of Great Sages. They take on all sorts of big challenges, and they get all of them done... They're the strongest mages anywhere! I really look up to them."

"Why would Great Sages be given such a dishonorable name? I don't quite understand..."

"Because they were so thorough about destroying anyone who got in their way. They were all so free and independent, and just followed their own paths... Seriously, they were just the *best*! I wish I could've met them all..."

Luceris didn't entirely understand, but she at least got the sense that these mages Iris looked up to were beyond the realm of common sense. Still, it seemed strange to her that a group of apparent troublemakers were all Great Sages. Something didn't quite add up.

"Anyway, it looks like Jeanne is going to have to rest for a while. We don't know exactly what illness it is, so we can't be too careful."

"Aww... We have a job tomorrow! But yeah, I suppose there's nothing we can do about it. Guess Lena and I will just have to do our best to get it done with the two of us somehow." Iris sighed. "Will I really be able to keep Lena under control, though? I don't think I will..."

"U-Under control? And...why are you sighing like that?"

Something about Iris's sigh had Luceris worried. But with Jeanne's condition still up in the air, there was no way they could send her out on mercenary work.

Luceris passed her judgment: the sick had to rest. While her mercenary

companions were out, Luceris would take on the task of nursing Jeanne, meaning she'd be going back and forth between the inn and the church for the next little while.

The next day, Iris and Lena would join a merchant's carriage as guards, taking them outside of Santor.

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Three days later...

"I'm so *bored*... My body feels sluggish... Lu, can I go outside and get some exerc—"

"No. You're still recovering, okay? However much you might be feeling better, pushing yourself before you're *completely* healed could make it worse again. So absolutely not."

"C'mon, I thought *you* used to be the reckless one... I'm gonna lose my strength at this rate! Seriously, though, who would've thought the tomboy from back then'd end up as a proper apprentice priestess, huh? I guess time really can change people..."

"The same goes for you! You used to be so shy around other people, and you were always crying... I remember all the times I saved you when you were being bullied. That brings me back... Heh heh!"

"We kind of brought it on ourselves... Still, we both have changed a lot, huh?"

"There's one person who *hasn't* changed, you know?"

"Ah... Yeah. Head Pastor Melratha, right? Really, she's such a hedonist..."

The person who had raised the two of them at the orphanage was Melratha, a pastor who constantly indulged in alcohol and gambling. A free spirit, to put it mildly; very much the opposite of what you'd expect from a priest.

The two of them were thankful to her for raising them, but they also remembered how she had pushed the other priests around with her unreasonable behavior, crying in secret later on. And that didn't seem to have changed.

For some reason, she was incredibly popular with people around town, and

was so bold and chivalrous that she outclassed even the toughest-looking men. And it was hard to tell what kind of secrets she might hold.

“It seems like you’ve taken after her looks, Jeanne, if nothing else. Even if you *are* just a scared little bunny on the inside.”

“And for you, I guess she was a great example of what *not* to do as a priest. But, hey—didn’t you not even believe in the gods?”

“I believe in them about as much as the average person does, you know? But the fact that we grew up safely was thanks to the love the pastors showed us, and the help we got from all sorts of people living here. It wasn’t as if the gods themselves did anything for us. I *do* still pray, though, for what it’s worth.”

“I take it all back, Lu: maybe you *have* taken after the pastor on the inside. That sounds exactly like something she’d say! You’re a priest, you know—even *if* you’re just a provisional one. You’ll get the Inquisition after you.”

“As you said, I’m just a *provisional* priest. Just an innocent little apprentice~!”

“Damn, you’re cheeky...”

As much as the pair’s appearances had changed, their personalities were still the same as when they were younger.

Luceris, the tomboy—and Jeanne, the timid girl with a real shyness around strangers. The two of them had been raised practically as sisters, and they’d always supported each other through life. They were family.

Around the time that Luceris had gone to the abbey for training, Jeanne had started to learn the sword. But now, they were back together in Santor.

At this point, neither of them had any way of knowing that they would both start to fall for the same man.

Nor was Jeanne aware in the slightest that that same man was the one who had coincidentally just saved her life.

The man in question had thought that it probably *was* just a cold she had—and he, too, would wait a while to learn the truth.

A few days later, Iris and Lena would meet Zelos for the first time. But for now, he was a total stranger to them.

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story by
Yasukiyo
Kotobuki

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Those
are...
Those are
magic
formulas
carved
into them!

M-Master?
What are
these?

These
are some
magic
conduits I
made; you
can use
them in
place of a
staff.

When a mage granted a magic conduit
to their student, it signified that they
had recognized that student as a
full-fledged mage.



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by Kotobuki Yasukiyo

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