

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

OR HOW I WAS
CURSED BY THE GODS
AND DROPPED INTO
THE **ABYSS**!

WRITTEN BY Nekoko
ILLUSTRATED BY Yoh Hihara

NOVEL

5

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DAMIA

LOVIS

YOZAKURA

"I told you this before we got here: something's brewing. I'm not going to be satisfied with some petty criminal organizations in a slum. I'm certain of it, now that we've spent a few days investigating the city...the residents are on edge, and the country's knights have shown up to monitor things. Whatever bloated evil resides in greed-infested Ploroque, it will make its move soon. That is our prey."



GREDE

“Don’t think
you’ve won yet,
little human
boy!”

“...I’m sorry for
defeating you
without knowing
your feelings
or convictions.
But...you’re not
something that
can exist in this
world.”

KANATA



LUNAÈRE ■

“I’m only
checking
on Kanata
95 percent
of the
time!”

“P-please,
Noble! Ten
minutes...
just give it
back for ten
minutes a
day!”

NOBLE MIMIC ■

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Seven Seas
Entertainment

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DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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Chapter 1:

The Unseen Hand of the Gods

– 1 –

THE UNSEEN HAND OF THE GODS

MONSTER TERRITORY stretched across the northern reaches of the continent, and no humans were foolish enough to journey into the expanse. Deep in that region was a massive tower: the Arm of the Gods. Three people were gathered inside.

King Veranta, Ruler of the World, sat upon the throne. The Silent Void remained hidden beneath a cloth inscribed with magic formulas. The devil-like Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, stood nearly ten feet tall and clad in full armor.

They were the Five Fingers, members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods and charged by the Higher Beings to control the world of Locklore.

“Again, Veranta? Why do you persist in summoning us...?” said Nobunaga irritably. He scowled and looked around him, unable to find the other two members that should have been there with them. “Hmph, where are the rest? Wasn’t the Ruler of the Skies going to report on that traveler Kanata or whatever his name was? Tsk, how dare that weakling keep *me* waiting.”

“It’s for that very reason I called you here today,” said Veranta.

“Huh?” Nobunaga glowered.

“I have lost contact with the Ruler of the Skies after sending them on the reconnaissance mission,” explained Veranta. “I believe they are either dead or captured. There is also a possibility they betrayed us...but becoming one of the Five Fingers and maintaining world order is the highest possible honor to someone with dragon blood in their veins. The most likely possibility is they simply lost in a battle against Kanata Kanbara.”

“Ha ha, defeated?! Pah! How pathetic. Tasked with simple reconnaissance, and they failed even at that. Veranta, perhaps the blame lies on you for telling them they would be replaced if they failed to produce results, eh? Maybe they panicked and rushed? Ha ha!”

Nobunaga chortled loudly, then brought his hand to his chin and looked at Veranta. “But don’t be so vague. Don’t you know what happened to the Ruler of the Skies? Shouldn’t we have Sophia, the World’s Recordkeeper, to tell us that? Wasn’t the plan to have the Ruler of the Skies force the traveler to act, then have Sophia watch and analyze?”

“Sophia... I am unable to contact her either. I believe she may also be dead, captured, or turned traitor. She is shameless but has a particularly strong attachment to life—capable of anything when it comes down to it. I believe there is a high probability she has betrayed us.”

“Ha! Both of them are as spineless as jellyfish! Utterly useless twits! It’s positively poetic! So, that fool of a woman betrayed us? She *is* shameless...you have that part right, Veranta! She has her long life and love of money to keep her going!” Nobunaga let out another hearty laugh.

“There is one other thing,” said Veranta. “We’ve received an additional message from the Higher Beings. We have been told to be careful of someone called Lunaère...a white-haired lich who may be assisting Kanata Kanbara. I doubt Sophia could be captured by an enemy she was already aware of. There is a chance Sophia was attacked by Lunaère.”

“...Hmm, another message from the higher beings seems ominous. A white-haired lich, they said? I haven’t heard of such a person. Are the Higher Beings making this up as they go along?”

“The Higher Beings never send messages that are more detailed than necessary, and they never send messages directly relating to travelers from other worlds. That has been an iron-clad rule that was never broken...until now. They wanted to avoid providing us with too much information, but this incident may very well be out of control, even for them. They normally change the course of history through their pawns, and yet we have lost two of the Five Fingers without having made acceptable progress... ”

“The Higher Beings sound like fools. Ridiculous to think that these beings control the fate of this world,” said Nobunaga, then placed his hand on the hilt of the katana at his side. “But...that means the Unseen Hand of the Gods is down to three members. You summoned me here, then foolishly told me everything... Don’t you think that was dangerous, Veranta? The Unseen Hand once interfered with my attempt to take over the world using the military might of the Yamato Kingdom. Then you forced me to join you. Don’t you wonder if I still bear a grudge?”

“Do you intend to betray the Unseen Hand and take over the world?” asked Veranta, and Nobunaga grinned.

“I joined the Unseen Hand because I would be unable to handle the members if they attacked me at once. There would be no fun in losing because I was outnumbered. Now that there are only the two of you, well...it might be fun to cut both of you down and finally take control of the world. Don’t you agree, Veranta?”

“You are strong, Nobunaga. Perhaps the most accomplished swordsman in all Locklorian history. If you tried...yes, you could kill me.”

“And yet somehow you manage to make that boring. And here I thought you called yourself the Ruler of the World.”

“Don’t make me use the Silent Void...Zero. If Zero unleashed their full power, neither you nor I could stop them. Zero is like a delete button, ready to undo the mistakes of this world. I have no desire to see it happen, but if you go out of control...”

Nobunaga looked at Zero. They were silent as always, obscured by their black cloth, and no bigger than a child. Nobunaga didn’t feel threatened in the slightest.

“This scrawny, black-cloaked guy...? How about we give it a try and find out?” Nobunaga opened his eyes and shot a menacing glare toward Zero.

It was an obvious test. Anyone subjected to Nobunaga’s glare, backed by the force of his magic, would cower in fear. That look could force an inexperienced warrior to sense their own impending demise. It was enough to break anyone. Sometimes it could even kill them from sheer fright. Only the powerful could

force their will to endure his hostile stare.

Nobunaga didn't expect one of the Five Fingers to wilt under a single glare. Zero would certainly survive the look, but Nobunaga's real hope was that he could gauge his mysterious comrade's strength by the effort Zero put into resisting.

And yet...*nothing*. No fear, no anger, no resistance. Zero just stood there, exactly as they had been. This was a first for Nobunaga. His hostility just passed harmlessly through Zero, like radiation through a void.

"Hey, Veranta," said Nobunaga, "Is Zero...alive?"

"It's not my place to say. Just know that they are my secret weapon. And they're the *world's* secret weapon."

"Hmph, whatever. It may be more entertaining to fight Kanata or Lunaère than you two at this point, anyway. I will continue to follow orders...for now. Just understand that my compliance depends on my mood. I'll give you time to gather a few more Fingers, at least."

"I will keep that in mind. However, you won't be the one to act next," said Veranta.

"What?! Are you going yourself? Or are you considering sending Zero?"

"We lost two Fingers without understanding the situation at all. We must not spread our forces thin. We will attack Kanata Kanbara with seeds that have already been sown. If that finishes him off, all the better. But if Kanata Kanbara survives, then we can hit him with overwhelming force after we watch what happens. If possible, we'll also find out what happened to the Ruler of the Skies and Sophia—they may not be dead, and it would be a shame to lose them so easily. We can either save them...or *reason* with them."

"Ahh, how wise of you, Ruler of the World...and how cowardly." Nobunaga sneered.

Veranta smiled slightly behind his mask and stood. "Then let us be cowards. We carry the world on our shoulders. A billion souls rely on our decisions. We will deal with Kanata Kanbara for the sake of order and Locklore's continued existence. We will do so by whatever means necessary."

NOW THAT WE'D successfully stopped Ramiel and imprisoned her, we went back to the merchant city of Ploroque to hunt for Rosemonde. Hopefully, she was still hanging around the city.

We'd left her to protect Ramiel back when we thought she was a powerless dragonkin girl. Rosemonde must have been alarmed when the real Ruler of the Skies gave her the slip.

We split up and searched the city. On the fourth day, we finally heard rumors of an adventurer frequenting an item shop called The Pixie's Wingbeats, and they'd been asking about a dragonkin girl.

Rosemonde was there when we arrived, and the shop owner was kind enough to let us use the break room in the back so we could catch up.

"Sorry, Rosemonde," I said. "I wanted to check in sooner, but Ploroque is bigger and busier than I expected."

Way bigger and way busier. I'd heard the city had a prosperous merchant economy, but there were more people here than I ever imagined.

"Don't sweat it, kid," said Rosemonde, who was clearly upset. "You've probably been through hell in the Garden of the Dragons, but listen..."

The air felt heavy, and she looked as if she was trying to find an easy way to give us terrible news. I cringed, knowing what she was feeling. I could imagine Ramiel sticking her tongue out and making fun of me.

"Um, if this is about the Ruler of the Skies..." I started, but Rosemonde's head dropped in a show of total embarrassment. I'd never seen her like this. It was unnerving.

"I'm the one who's sorry, kid..." she said. "Ramiel got snatched. I was full of myself and said I could handle watching that little brat, but I couldn't even do that. Ha...! Annihilation Rosemonde really screwed it this time."

“D-don’t say that! You did fine! I’m serious!” I said.

“I thought it was the work of some goon from the Garden of the Dragons, come to tie up loose ends, y’know? But then I figured, nah...”

“Yes! It’s not like that at all!” In the beginning, Ramiel had asked us to report the Ruler of the Skies’s schemes to the Dragon King, so it was easy for Rosemonde to have drawn that conclusion. But Ramiel herself was the real Ruler of the Skies. She’d tried to lure both us and the Dragon King into the same trap.

“Now all I got on them is a lead I picked up a couple of days ago,” continued Rosemonde.

“...Th-them?” I stammered. *What is she talking about?*

Baffled, I missed a chance to explain what was really going on.

“Look guy, Ploroque ain’t what it seems,” explained Rosemonde. “It’s more than just some rich city. There’s Grede, the Lord of Merchants—the guy rose to power sixty years ago, and he’s been a local lord ever since. Nothing matters here more than money and competition, and the economy’s booming. Now it’s the haves versus the have-nots if you know what I’m sayin’, and money wins out over common decency.”

“Uh, what’re you getting at—?”

“In Ploroque, they’re playin’ for keeps. If you hit rock bottom, you’ll *never* crawl your way back up again. The slums here are packed like sardines with people who’ve got no hope left. You keep stacking desperate people on top of desperate people, and eventually you get kidnappings, drug addictions, human trafficking... It’s mob rule, kid. People die and nobody cares. They call the slums the black quarter. I’m betting that’s where we find the goons who took Ramiel.”

“Uh, that’s... Actually, she—”

“I don’t like to think about it either, kid, but that’s how it is! The Cup of Blood got decapitated in the whole thing with the Red Staff of Authority. And they’re sayin’ Lovis Lordgrey of the Black Reapers died in that mess too. Nobody’s callin’ the shots for those groups anymore, and their members have been sighted hanging around Ploroque.”

“Wait! Lovis is dead?!” I cried.

There was no doubt Lovis was a jerk, but I had mixed feelings about that news given our personal history. He must have met someone who wouldn’t stand for his groveling after he screwed things up.

“The black quarter is wicked chaotic right now, kid,” continued Rosemonde. “There’s a breakdown of the unspoken rule that keeps the criminals from damaging the city’s facade. The old gangsters know how much trouble it’s gonna be for them if the underground starts leaking out of the slums.”

None of Rosemonde’s information about the criminal organization in Ploroque was registering because I was so shocked by the news of Lovis’s death. I didn’t think he’d go down easily...even if he did get wrapped up in chaos in Manaloch.

He gave me that compass—which I’d thought on several occasions I might sell if I needed the money. Now it was a memento of someone who had departed from this world. What would I do with it? It seemed wrong to pawn it now.

“Ah, actually...no! Listen, Rosemonde: Ramiel is fine!” I said, trying to get back to the matter at hand. “Uh, I mean, she’s *not* fine at all. Ramiel is the Ruler of the Skies! But she’s safe...kind of.”

“What the...?!” Rosemonde’s eyes grew wide.

“Yeah... Ramiel tricked us into going to the Garden of the Dragons because she planned to use the Dragon Vortex there to kill me. That didn’t work, so now she’s being held prisoner by the Dragon King in the Garden.” I spoke slowly, gauging Rosemonde’s reaction to be sure I was getting through.

She’d spent nearly a week searching for Ramiel and coming up with dead ends. There was no way this news wouldn’t annoy her.

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t understand half of that, but you’re saying she wasn’t kidnapped by criminals and she wasn’t killed by someone working for the Ruler of the Skies? She’s not dead, right? She’s just in jail or somethin’?”

Rosemonde let out a heavy sigh of what appeared to be genuine relief.

“Rosemonde-san...” I said. I’d expected her to blow up, for sure—but maybe

Rosemonde's heart was bigger than her temper after all.

"That's great, kid. Really great. That means I get to *kill* the stupid little brat when I finally catch her!" cried Rosemonde as she slammed her hands on the table and stood up, knocking her chair backward.

No, her temper was certainly larger than her heart.

"P-please calm down, Rosemonde-san! We're guests in this item shop! You shouldn't be that loud!"

"I knew something was fishy! That rude little...! It was all an act!"

Actually...being rude probably wasn't an act. After Ramiel was captured, she still couldn't bring herself to be polite. I kept that to myself though—Rosemonde was angry enough as it was.

But now I had a problem.

Ramiel had proposed a trade: she would provide us with information on Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, *if* we brought Rosemonde to her. But that might be a hard sell seeing how Rosemonde was reacting. Murderous as her claims were, I doubted she really meant them. At the same time, I didn't think she'd go all the way to the Garden of the Dragons just to meet with Ramiel, either.

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LOVIS

SOMEWHERE IN THE black quarter, standing on roofs of patchwork-colored tiles, three people looked down at the city.

"So, this is the hidden face of Ploroque? Such extremes of wealth and poverty, living side by side," said a gaunt man with black hair and an unsettling aura. It was Lovis, the former leader of the Black Reapers.

Behind him stood two people—Yozakura, a woman in Japanese-styled clothing, and Damia, a chubby man wearing goggles.

“Currency is an incredible invention,” continued Lovis. “It takes complex human desires and funnels them in one direction. The citizens of Ploroque rush toward money the moment they catch a whiff of it. They’re ants swarming a gumbdrop dropped on the ground.”

“It’s only natural for people to act in unison when they experience simple and powerful emotions...like fear,” said Yozakura, and Lovis’s expression clouded over.

This was clearly a jab at him. He’d thrown himself to his knees and begged for forgiveness the moment he took a hit from Kanata.

“Hm? I didn’t hear you, Yozakura,” he said. “Is there something you want to say?”

“I don’t have to say it. You already know.”

Then when Lovis ran into Lunaère, he’d done everything in his power to convince her he was Kanata’s friend and somehow she let him go. But he’d promised her that he would never again dirty his hands with evildoings.

If he ever surfaced as a criminal again, it wouldn’t just be the authorities coming after him—it would be a real god of death. That’s why he disbanded the Black Reapers and cut off all contact with the former members, except for the two that were with him now. He’d been more than happy to let rumors of his death circulate while he laid low.

“You disbanded the Reapers, and now you live in constant fear of a girl spying on you,” said Yozakura. “You used to hold freedom above all else... Why don’t you just end yourself?”

“You don’t understand. I’m living exactly how I want to. I always have and I always will.”

“Then why did you disband the Reapers?”

“I came to a fork in the road. To the left, life. To the right, death. I chose to go left.” Lovis could no longer act as a Black Reaper, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t seek out places where trouble was brewing.

Lovis’s primary love was fighting. Committing crimes merely generated

opportunities for chaos and battle. But if he put himself in locations where a fight was likely to break out, he could jump in on a side without the need to cause the initial problem himself.

“Yozakura, calm down!” said Damia, stepping in between the pair of them as he tried to play peacemaker. “Sir, I understand how you feel after seeing that white-haired girl. It’s not fun to squish insects, and it’s not fun to get squished either.”

“She’s not a white-haired *girl*! She’s the *White Goddess*!” shouted Lovis as he slammed his fist onto the building’s roof.

“R-right...of course.” Damia’s shoulders slumped as he hung his head.

Lovis’s fear of Lunaère grew daily. Lately, he’d even started saying she must be one of the higher beings. To top it off, he didn’t actually know her real name.

“Don’t show disrespect! Say it!”

“...Sh-she’s the White Goddess.”

“Hmph, mind your tongue from now on, Damia.”

Damia’s desire to defend Lovis was rapidly cooling into discontent. He’d joined the Black Reapers because he was drawn in by Lovis’s dark charisma. Lovis existed as a sort of heroic ideal rather than a real person. He’d accepted the new situation more than Yozakura had, but he didn’t like seeing Lovis secretly terrified by the shadows of Kanata and the white-haired girl.

“Yozakura, how many times have I told you, you’re free to go whenever you wish,” said Lovis.

“No. I still respect Lovis,” said Yozakura without a moment’s hesitation.

“Then—”

“But the Lovis I respect is the one who lives his life without fear. The one who saved me. If this current Lovis becomes too much of a lie, if he sullies the name of the *real* Lovis...then I’ll cut him down myself. And I’ll walk into the abyss straight after him.”

Yozakura tilted her sheath and bared a tiny fraction of the blade of her katana. Damia nervously glanced back and forth between Lovis’s and Yozakura’s

faces.

“Oh, come off it, Yozakura,” said Lovis. “Someone like you wouldn’t even stand a chance, but I look forward to the day. Come at me whenever you want. Just remember to sharpen your blade in advance.”

Yozakura pushed her blade back into the sheath. “I hope you mean what you say. And I pray that the disgraceful Lovis that appears in front of Kanata or that woman won’t show himself ever again.”

Damia looked at Yozakura and let out a sigh of relief. He understood how she felt; he knew she might well attack Lovis, depending on his response.

“Yozakura, she’s not *that woman*! White Goddess! Say it!” said Lovis.

Yozakura’s lips trembled in rage.

“B-by the way, Lovis,” said Damia, raising his voice to waylay another argument. “You said there are different criminal organizations in the black quarter. Have you decided who we’re going to start taking down? I’m a bit bored of this sightseeing tour. Should we start tomorrow?”

“No. We lay low and gather more information.”

“Oh...really?” Damia stared blankly at Lovis.

“I told you this before we got here: something’s brewing. I’m not going to be satisfied with some petty criminal organizations in a slum. I’m certain of it, now that we’ve spent a few days investigating the city...the residents are on edge, and the country’s knights have shown up to monitor things. Whatever bloated evil resides in greed-infested Ploroque, it will make its move soon. *That* is our prey.”

Lovis looked down at the black quarter beneath him and ran his tongue over his lips.

He never imagined that Kanata might be in Ploroque as well.

MEANWHILE, Lunaère was in the far east. She'd gone to Kyou, the capital of the Yamato Kingdom, on a search for information about Nobunaga.

Kyou was a wondrous sight with its ornate rows of tall pavilions. The entire city was coated in brilliant vermilion paint and gold leaf. Lunaère wore her black Impurity Sealing Robe and carried Noble on her back, wrapped in a large cloth she bought from a stall. She moved to a deserted side street and set him down.

"I'm a bit tired," she said.

"Not like you to get worn out from walking," said Noble.

"It's not the walking. I'm not used to being in a place with so many people. I was thinking we should find a place to rest. I don't have to walk around to investigate anyway. Sophia was kind enough to give me Tiamat's Eye."

Lunaère pulled the glittering gold crystal from her inside pocket: the eye of the dragon known as the Insightful, and an incredibly powerful item capable of showing its owner any location in the world. Lunaère couldn't even find something this useful in Cocytus.

Despite possessing it for nearly ten thousand years, Sophia happily gave it to her when she learned Lunaère was moving against the Unseen Hand of the Gods.

So far, she'd learned how to shift the location Tiamat's Eye showed her and then searched for the Unseen Hand around the world. It required a significant input of magic and concentration, but it was a useful item. Lunaère used it to gather as much information as possible whenever she had the time.

"And since we're taking a break now, I might as well search a little," she said. Tiamat's Eye showed images of the world that changed at blinding speed.

"I'd expect that to make you even more tired, the way it sucks down magic..." said Noble. "But it's nice that she gave you that, it's a pretty expensive item."

"I agree. But the way she gave it to me was so casual. Perhaps she has lots of items like this, since her race lives so long."

“High elves are pretty cool.”

“Even so, that doesn’t change the fact that this is a valuable item. There might have been some other reason she gave it to me. Thinking back, Sophia did act oddly when I first mentioned the Unseen Hand of the Gods. She knew far more about them than I expected, especially for someone who claimed absolutely no connection to them. She’s lived for ten thousand years, but still...”

“You don’t think she’s got something to do with them, do ya?”

“I do. It’s quite possible the Unseen Hand is her enemy. She was clearly hostile toward me when I first arrived and didn’t show any interest in the ring I tried to give her as a gift. I think there’s another reason she chose to cooperate, and it wasn’t out of the kindness of her heart or for money. She probably believed I could make a successful attack against the Unseen Hand. Or...she could wish to use me as a disposable pawn.”

“Yeah, that’s how they get ya.” Noble rocked his entire body like he was nodding his head.

Thinking about it more, there was no way Sophia could be involved with the Unseen Hand or she would’ve never given Lunaère—who was *surely* their enemy—a Godly Rank item like Tiamat’s Eye.

“Well, I don’t know Sophia’s intentions,” said Lunaère. “But the important thing is that she’s helping me. It could be a good idea to meet with her if I find myself stuck again. It should also be much easier to find her next time since I have Tiamat’s Eye.”

After saying that, Lunaère took her eyes off the crystal for a moment to look around Kyou. A pair of lovers wearing matching kimonos passed by.

“Kimonos...those are nice. P-perhaps I should buy one. I could show it to Kanata.”

“Kanata this, Kanata that. I thought we were here for information. Did you find any leads on the Unseen Hand or not?” asked Noble irritably. He peered into Tiamat’s Eye and saw Kanata walking into what looked like a general goods store. “Hey! What are you looking at?!”

He struck out with his tongue to smack Lunaère, but she crouched down to

dodge it.

“You surprise me, Noble. Where did this poor behavior come from all of a sudden?”

“I’m the one who should be surprised!”

“Oh... I’m... I’m just doing this to check Kanata’s safety. He is being targeted by the Unseen Hand, after all,” insisted Lunaère.

“You said you were looking for a lead! You’ve been looking at Kanata this whole time!”

“I’m only checking on Kanata 95 percent of the time!”

“That’s basically all of it! Oh...I know that face! That’s the face you make when you’re up to something!”

“Aah! I was just wondering who he was looking for, and it’s that armored lady! She acts way too friendly with Kanata... Maybe I should say something to her about that.”

“You’re being a stalker! This is worse than when you were using that invisible spirit! Lemme hold on to that item!”

“No! I can’t keep watch over Kanata if you have the crystal!” Lunaère yanked Tiamat’s Eye away from Noble and clutched it tightly.

“Oh, Kanata, fancy meeting you here,” said Noble loudly, looking over Lunaère’s shoulder.

She spun around and quickly hid Tiamat’s Eye behind her. “K-Kanata?”

“Gotcha!” cried Noble. As Lunaère’s grip faltered, he used his tongue to snag the crystal from her hands.

“Aaah! You tricked me, Noble! Give it back!”

Noble pulled Tiamat’s Eye into his mouth and snapped his lid shut tight. “Relax. From now on, I’ll search for those Unseen Hand guys and check up on Kanata.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous! You can’t use Tiamat’s Eye to its full potential with the amount of magic you have!”

“If 95 percent of your time was spent chasing after Kanata, then I only need 5 percent of what you were using, yeah? I’ll manage.”

“P-please, Noble! Ten minutes...just give it back for ten minutes a day!” Tears welled in Lunaère’s eyes. She put her hands on either side of Noble and shook him desperately. Noble kept his expression straight and his lips sealed tight.

Chapter 2:

Mel the Artificer

– 1 –

INSIDE THE PIXIE'S WINGBEATS, we continued our conversation with Rosemonde.

"So...Rosemonde-san, would you be willing to come to the Garden of the Dragons with us to see Ramiel?" I asked.

"You gotta be kidding me." Rosemonde made no attempt to hide her scowl.

"It's just... Ramiel said she'd tell me about the members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods if I arrange a meeting with you. She'll tell me about Nobunaga."

"Come on, guy. I wasn't born yesterday."

"Look," I started, but I knew it wouldn't work. There was no reason Rosemonde would want to see Ramiel. "I'm in a bind. According to Ramiel, the other members of the Unseen Hand are way higher level than her."

These were the people who controlled the world from behind the scenes. If the rest of the organization was a higher level than Ramiel, I wouldn't be surprised if one might actually be a higher level than me. They might have some sort of dangerous weapon that went beyond mere levels too. Ramiel had planned to defeat me using the Dragon Vortex, after all.

"Please, Rosemonde-san," I said. "Right now, I can only do this with your help."

"Sounds tough, kid...real tough. But it's got nothing to do with me."

Rosemonde clicked her tongue in annoyance. She lazily leaned her elbows onto the table, her eyes narrowing into a scowl.

It didn't look like I'd be getting help from Rosemonde. It might be better to rely on Ridler to pull information about Nobunaga from Ramiel.

"Well... I guess I am along for the ride," said Rosemonde. "I got no other

plans, so I might as well go. But look, I have no clue if I can get anything out of her. And I'll be wicked pissed if you drag me into something dangerous."

Sh-she's so kind! I thought, then said, "O-of course. I'd be incredibly grateful if you helped! I don't think Ramiel wishes you any harm. She actually felt guilty about lying to you and leaving you in the city. Maybe she wants to apologize..."

"Seriously?" Rosemonde looked at me dubiously.

"Well...something like that." I recalled what Ramiel said...

"Yes, yes, I lost that weak little adventurer somewhere in Ploroque."

To be honest, Ramiel probably wasn't capable of feeling guilt. "I might have exaggerated a little," I said.

"Maybe I'll stay put, then."

"P-please! I'm begging you! I'll even pay! I could get you a couple hundred million gold, or a couple billion if you give me a little time!"

"Don't say stuff like that, kid! Leave it to you to make that much money sound worthless!" Rosemonde slapped the table, then immediately brought her hand to her chin like she remembered something. "Speaking of gold. Kanata...you're a traveler from another world, right?"

"Uh, where'd you hear that?" I tried to avoid actively talking about it, so I was surprised that Rosemonde knew.

"Ares's Hand is a traveler. Your name is kind of like hers, and you guys look alike. And you helped get her whole manga thing into publication. You just got a lot in common is all."

Dang. That's how she figured it out.

Still, saying I helped with the manga was a stretch, and it hadn't turned out at all how Kotone wanted. All I did was teach Garnet some basic vocabulary, do some editing, give some simple explanations, and add minor correction notes. It probably would have gotten published even without me.

"Fine. I am a traveler...but why are you asking?" I muttered.

"Oh, Rooosemooonde!" called a girl from the front of the shop. "You didn't

find that Ramiel girl in the end, but it looks like it's all taken care of!" She wore a tiny, bright-red hat and a monocle: Mel, the owner of The Pixie's Wingbeats.



She'd previously worked as an artificer out in the country. Then a merchant in Ploroque invited her to set up shop in the city. She accepted, and now here she was. Artificers were like cousins of alchemists. While alchemists placed a lot of importance on changing the materials, artificers focused on morphing those materials into items.

The boundary between the two was vague and complicated. Alchemists needed some of the same skills that artificers used, while artificers needed a certain level of alchemy skill. Essentially, alchemists could turn dirt into metal, while artificers could turn metal into a screw. Rather than the intense depth and breadth of alchemic understanding, artificers needed imagination and absurdly dexterous magic abilities.

"This has turned into a real mess," said Rosemonde. "Sorry for dragging you into this, Mel."

"No worries! Not like I was able to do anything anyway!" Mel chuckled and waved her hand.

"Mel-san, I'm sorry we've been taking up space in your shop," I said. "You can probably hear us up front...can't you?"

Rosemonde had shouted pretty loudly earlier and knocked over her chair. It surely scared off several customers.

"...Uh, no. No. My shop isn't... Customers never come into my shop, normally." Mel seemed uncomfortable discussing it.

But she'd put serious effort into the appearance of her shop and the goods she sold, or at least it looked that way. The shop's location was also pretty good, even by Ploroque standards. Maybe she was just being humble when she said people didn't come to her shop. If no one really came in today, I'd bet it was just because we were making so much noise with our conversation.

"We won't bother you anymore," I said. "Let's move to a café or—"

"Relax, guy," interrupted Rosemonde. "She's not lyin'."

"Rosemonde-san, that's rude."

"I asked for Mel's help, thinkin' I could get some information from people

who passed through this shop. I made zero progress. People don't come in here."

There was an uncomfortable pause in the room. Even if what Rosemonde said was true, she didn't have to be so blunt about it in front of Mel.

"But she did help you though, didn't she?" said Pomera with a glare toward Rosemonde. "That's no way to treat a friend, Rosemonde!"

I thought Rosemonde would have a response for that, but she gave a small sigh and took a sip of the water in her glass on the table. Then, in a heavy tone, she said, "...This shop is a fraud. A scam to con someone from the country out of a little money and a big dream."

Pomera's mouth clamped shut.

"O-oh, Rosemonde, you're so dramatic!" said Mel with a nervous laugh. "It's just...right now...things have just kind of blown up in my face! But I'm not giving up!" Her voice grew louder, and she squeezed her fists tight. She looked like she was putting on a brave face to me, though.

"F-fraud? I mean, she does own the shop," I said.

"The devil's in the details here, kid," said Rosemonde with a heavy sigh. "I used The Pixie's Wingbeats as my base of operations while I gathered info. I listened to Mel complain when I had time here and there, and I finally figured it out. This city is a mousetrap to catch anyone with a dream."

"Wh-what's going on?"

"Some merchant from Ploroque told Mel she should open shop here, right? That was the bait: nice sounding words and space in the best area of Ploroque, right? So she came with all the money she'd saved up from toilin' out in the sticks." Rosemonde sounded frustrated.

"I-I told you, Mr. Wantz sees a lot of promise in me!" said Mel, desperate to explain. "He even gave me half of my startup costs! Half!"

I realized Mel was talking about the merchant that suggested she open up shop in Ploroque.

"C'mon, Mel, think about it rationally," said Rosemonde. "You paid through

the nose for the building and the location, right? You complained about it before.”

“B-but, it’s one of the best spots in Ploroque...”

Rosemonde turned to me and said, “This Wantz guy has connections with the local landlords. He goes to people and sweet-talks them, like ‘I’m sure *you* will succeed,’ ‘Opportunities like this don’t last long!’ or ‘If you act now, I can provide partial investment.’ Then he snaps the trap with an outrageous contract. He’s a con man.”

“Uh...” I’d seen news reports of things like that happening in Japan, but I was surprised that that sort of fraud existed in Locklore. It wasn’t what I expected in a world of swords and magic. A merchant city sounded quaint, but it turned out serious corruption lay beneath that wholesome image.

Rosemonde kept going. “And then Grede & Co. has got its fingers in everybody’s business in the city. You can barely sell anything if you’re not in league with Grede. Obviously, Mel signed up with them too, but newbies gotta let them hold a *deposit*. You know, just to cover for damages if you ever do anything to damage public trust in the company... They say they’ll return your money if you manage to keep your shop running for two years.” She rolled her eyes.

“That’s unusual,” I said.

“Lemme make it simple: the contract says that if your shop folds before then, you’ve severely damaged the company’s image by conducting business poorly under the Grede & Co. name. Then they keep all your money. It’s a racket.”

I buried my face in my hands.

“Oh, it gets even better,” continued Rosemonde, “Mel didn’t have enough money to cover what she needed to give to Grede & Co. But a generous company like them? Well, they gave her a loan...at five times the maximum rate in Manaloch.”

So they kept your money as collateral, then saddled you with a high interest loan. They had Mel roped in from every direction. This Wantz sounded like an important figure with influence in Grede & Co., to boot. He’d built up an entire

system through collusion with different groups that let him drag people like Mel into his trap.

“What’s wrong, Kanata? You’re lookin’ a little sick, kid. I’m not even done yet,” said Rosemonde.

“I don’t want to hear any more. I get the picture.” My head hurt from listening to this. It was probably best if we left this city as soon as we could. I had a feeling I’d sink further into depression if I walked around its resplendent streets while knowing the truth.

“Oh, come on, Rosemonde,” said Mel with another nervous laugh. “She’s just exaggerating the bad parts.”

Mel smiled, but I felt a cold sweat break out on my forehead as I thought about the situation. I wanted to tell her to open her eyes and see reality, but I also had a feeling she knew everything already. She was in no place to do anything about it.

Pomera was grimacing. So was Philia, who normally smiled no matter what happened. It was a complicated topic, but even she understood this was bad news.

“Oh, for sure, Wantz is a sweetheart,” drawled Rosemonde, “He arranged a special place for Mel to work in the black quarter when she goes bankrupt. Now she won’t have to trouble her family out in the country.”

“Please stop, this is way too heavy for me,” I said, bowing to Rosemonde without thinking. She’d mentioned the black quarter earlier—some sort of lawless slum born from the huge disparity between the rich and the poor. Then a thought struck me. “Wait, the contract with Grede & Co. being questionable doesn’t have anything to do with Mel’s shop not doing well—”

“Oh, *that’s* the good part! For Wantz’s scam to work, he’s got to have the new shop owner quickly sell back the land and building at a low price after he got ‘em to put up the money for the initial investment.”

“Go on...”

“Grede & Co. has a lot of regulations in place that restrict newcomers to the market so that a few people at the top can monopolize profits. There’s no way

you can win against the established shops. I even heard Wantz saw The Pixie's Wingbeats doing better than expected at first, so he went around to the other nearby shops and gave them tips to steal customers away from Mel."

"Right, okay... I think I understand now. You don't have to explain anymore. This is depressing." I stopped Rosemonde there. She looked like she could have kept going for hours.

"It's just a temporary setback!" protested Mel.

"Positive thinking isn't going to help you in this situation!" I said. She desperately needed to face reality.

"But don't you see it, Kanata?" asked Rosemonde. There was fire in her voice. "There's a *flaw* in Wantz's scam. His plan is to draw people in, rob them blind, and then drive them off fast. But if Mel can get the shop on the right track, she'll get her initial investment back *and* she'll get to camp here forever in this prime real estate. She'll beat him at his own game. If she can succeed in the city and build a place for herself, she can submit a formal complaint and get the company to strike at Wantz. It sounds nuts, but I think Mel's got the talent to pull it off."

"Oh, come on, Rosemonde, hee hee," said Mel. "Flattery won't get you any freebies, y'know?" Her face turned red, and she scratched her cheek.

"Mel-san, this is serious," I said. How could she look so happy-go-lucky at a time like this? Wasn't she listening?

"Doesn't it break your heart to leave her like this?" said Rosemonde. "That's why I've got a favor to ask you, Kanata. I'll go to the Garden of the Dragons *if* you help develop new products for Mel's shop. What do you think?"

"Develop new products?"

"You're from another world, aren't you? You've got to know at least one or two items that could sell here."

Oh, so that's what being a traveler has to do with this. This was all a setup.

"Ah! Kanata, you're a traveler?!" cried Mel as she clasped my shoulders.

"W-well, yeah..."

“So, you have information on items from your world?!” Now she was literally screaming spittle into my face.

“Sort of,” I said.

“Then, you’ll save me from that piece of garbage Wantz?! That scumbag con man?!”

“You *do* know it’s a scam!”

Now that there was a faint glimmer of hope, her true feelings came flooding out. Despair had a way of clouding your vision.

“Thank you so much! Thank you, Kanata—no!—*Lord* Kanata! If nothing changes, they’ll use me as a slave until I’m broken, then sell off my body from the hair on my head down to my toenails!”

“Don’t call me Lord!”

Pomera grabbed Mel from behind and peeled her off me. “P-please calm down, Mel! You’re frightening Kanata!”

“But, but, I...I might really end up dead if things keep going like this.” Mel’s face was a snotty, tear-soaked mess.

“How ’bout it then, kid?” said Rosemonde. “You can’t feel good leaving her like this now that you know the situation. Mel’s got the talent. You just gotta come up with a couple ideas.”

I know Rosemonde likes to look out for others, but how far will she go?

When she learned about Ramiel, the first thing she showed was relief. I think that was how she really felt, deep down. Leave it to Rosemonde to add in some complications.

“...Hmm, I’ve actually got some items I’ve been thinking of exchanging for money but haven’t been able to. You could stock the shelves with those.” They should be perfect for catching people’s eye. I could only give her A-rank items or below, since anything above that could literally start a war.

“Kanata, one-off items from a single adventurer aren’t gonna cut it. This is an artificer’s shop. She needs clients and products that can compete. As things are, other places have better selection and they’re able to tamp the prices down.”

“Makes sense.”

“There’s got to be some other world item that she can make. I just know it!”

“Me too!” chimed in Mel. “I have high hopes for them! Pleeese! If you save me, I’ll even be *your* slave! I’ll sell you anything! Do you need my kidney?!” She clung on to my clothes.

She was too desperate. She really must have no other options.

“Okay, okay! I’ll do my best and try and think of something!” I did want to help, if there was anything I could do.

Besides, I needed Rosemonde’s cooperation. I’d give Mel ideas if that was all it took.

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MEL, ROSEMONDE, Pomera, Philia, and I sat around the table and threw ourselves into developing new items for The Pixie’s Wingbeats.

I honestly had no idea what this world already had and what it didn’t have, or even what an artificer was capable of, so the first step was to learn about that. Mel gave me a broad overview of what an artificer could do, then she asked me to casually ramble about my old world so she could pull ideas out of that.

Ten minutes later I was holding my empty head in my hands.

“I thought I could think of something, but I’m drawing a blank...” I said, surprised.

I had been uneasy about this before I agreed to help. There must have been plenty of travelers who had brought their knowledge to this world over the centuries; I, on the other hand, had no technical or specialized knowledge to speak of.

“Oh, oh! Philia has an idea! Philia wants a teddy-bear cup!” said Philia as she raised her hand.

Mel lifted Philia up to her lap and petted her head. “Philia, you’re such a cutie! I’m going to work so hard and make you a teddy bear cup!” She pressed her cheek against Philia’s.

This girl is...amazing, I thought. She knew she was hanging on by a thread, so how did she manage to stay so bubbly? Rosemonde said she was talented. Maybe she had a point.

“All righty then, I’ll write down Philia’s opinions. Everyone else, keep throwing ideas at me as they come,” said Mel as she applied ink to a quill and wrote.

“Plastic might be good,” I said. I’d never seen it in this world. She could keep down the costs on her current items by replacing existing materials.

“Plastic? What’s that?” asked Mel.

“It’s a cheap and easy to use material. It’s made from crude oil.”

“Wow! That sounds amazing! Great, so how do you make it?!” Mel’s eyes shone as she looked at me.

“W-well... I don’t actually know.”

“Oh... Can’t do that then...” Mel’s shoulders slumped.

I had learned a decent amount of alchemy from Lunaère, but this world didn’t have any method for making a synthetic resin out of oil. Lunaère might be able to pull it off if I gave her as many tips as I could think of, but me? Nuh uh.

“I might be able to come up with a cheap and easy to use metal,” I said.

Then again, it would take time to find a simple alchemical method for creating a metal like that. It probably wouldn’t have that big an impact anyway, so the cost to benefit ratio wasn’t great.

“Pleeease, Master Kanata! I’ll give you 90 percent of my net profit!” said Mel. She took my hand and bowed over and over.

“Don’t call me Master. And before you think about profit, just worry about not going broke.”

I took the quill from her for a bit and wrote down whatever ideas came to mind. There were bicycles and their related goods, playing cards and other toys

that seemed simple to make, shampoo, cans for canned goods, and spray bottles.

I thought I might come up with at least one usable idea if I just started writing things down, but not one of them lived up to my expectations. All of them were either things that probably already existed in this world, things we couldn't possibly recreate, or things that were so boring they wouldn't attract any customers.

"Oooh! Wow! There's all sorts of ideas I might be able to use here!" cried Mel in excitement, unaffected by my skepticism.

My letters were getting faint, so I went to put more ink on the quill. I put too much on though, so my writing turned into giant blobs of ink.

"This is hard to use. Isn't there anything better?" I asked.

"Better?" asked Mel.

"Uh...like something that has the ink stored inside and always releases the exact right amount..."

I tried to explain, but Mel just stared at me with her mouth hanging open. I guess I wasn't expressing the idea well at all.

That sort of pen didn't exist in Locklore, apparently. I pondered the idea, then added felt-tip pens, markers with water-based ink, and ballpoint pens to the list of possible items. They weren't exciting, but they might be the best options.

No, to be honest, my motives were more selfish than that. Quills were such a pain that I just wanted her to make pens. I'd be first in line.

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"OH, SO PENCILS do already exist," I said.

"Yeah, sort of, but I don't bother keeping them around. They're expensive though, since the graphite core is hard to get... They're not common like they were

in your world, Kanata,” explained Mel. “I mean, I’d need a lot of graphite to make them, and they’d be unusable if they broke.”

We were talking about making the pens again, trying to reconcile my suggestion with general Locklorian understanding and Mel’s knowledge.

“Well, you could use alchemy to either produce it from other materials or to merge the broken fragments together into a larger piece,” I said. “If you can do that, you could produce them at a lower cost. Oh, is there a common item you can use for erasing what you wrote with a pencil?”

“Um...I don’t really use pencils all that much. I heard you can erase it with a piece of bread!”

“There’s not much point in making erasers then.” I drew a line through one of the options on the list, striking it out. The list also had motors and phonographs on it, but they were already crossed off. I had zero confidence that I could help build those from scratch.

Philia couldn’t keep up while Mel and I talked, so she’d laid her head on the table and was napping pleasantly.

“Urgh. I’m sorry, I’m not used to abstract discussions like this,” said Pomera as she desperately tried to understand everything. Her face was the picture of misunderstanding.

“Hmph,” grunted Rosemonde. She’d been extra surly, only offering the occasional half-hearted comment. I was sure that she didn’t understand the conversation either, but she couldn’t abandon it since she was the one who dragged me into this whole thing to begin with. Her pride was on the line.

I didn’t blame either of them, though. It took incredible amounts of knowledge and mental flexibility to listen to what I said about a culture from another world and use it to make connections to similar things in this world’s culture. It was apparent that Mel was a talented artificer since she could follow along with me most of the time. If I were in her spot, I was sure I’d barely understand a word.

I mean, she was the only one of the four of them that even knew what a pencil was.

“Mel-san, I think if you study alchemy, you’ll get a huge boost to what you can make and what you can think of,” I said.

My impression was that Locklore wasn’t lacking in new ideas per se, it just wasn’t making the most of the existing technology it had. Back in Japan, inventions had decades—centuries!—of refinement that made them better and better.

Take pencils for example: I’m almost certain modern pencils weren’t made from naturally existing graphite. But if I knew the basic technique of how modern graphite was made, I wouldn’t even need to know the exact technology that went into it. I could substitute alchemy for a lot of that process.

“Hmm...but I don’t think I have time to start studying alchemy if I want to save the shop,” said Mel. “It’s not the kind of thing I can learn that fast.”

“What if I tried teaching you a bit? I could also do some experiments and share any alchemical methods I find that might significantly reduce costs.”

In the worst-case scenario, they wouldn’t work someone to death in a dangerous job if that person excelled at both alchemy and item crafting.

“Thank you, Kanata the God!”

“Stop that.”

“If I survive this, I’m going to build a solid mithril statue of you in the middle of Ploroque!”

“I’m begging you, don’t.”

That would be even more ridiculous in a city where real estate was so expensive.

Pomera latched on to Mel’s shoulder, her expression serious. “Mel, if Kanata teaches you magic, you have to be prepared to see horrors that no person should ever see. The terror will halve your life span.”

“What’s wrong with that, Pomera?” asked Mel, clenching her hands into fists. “If he’s willing to spend his time teaching me, I’m willing to risk my life for it!”

“I-if you’re that determined, then I won’t stop you—”

“Besiiiides, if I stay like this, I won’t lose just a few years from my life—they’ll take it all! There’s a rumor about the black quarter; if you’re super in debt, they lock you in an underground labor prison and work you until you die! And it’s really, really dirty, and they just toss all the emaciated, skinny corpses to the side of the room! I couldn’t bear it! I want to work a normal job, and have a normal wedding, and die a normal death!”

Mel wrapped her arms around Pomera and sobbed.

“C-calm down now, Mel, it’s okay.” Pomera desperately patted Mel’s back.

“I had a dream that I’d set up a fancy shop in the city and would be loved as a charismatic, genius artificer! Is that too much to ask?! But even though I’ve been tricked and forced into a corner, I won’t give up now! Not when there’s a glint of hope on the horizon!”

She’s a very, er, emotional person. The stress of being trapped must be making her panic and giving her those wild mood swings.

“...Anyway, let’s focus on thinking about felt-tip pens, canning, and can openers,” I said. “I think we could do something with those if we combine what I remember with your skills, Mel.”

Water-based ink pens and ballpoint pens were too complex, and I didn’t know enough about them. And games like playing cards and chess already existed in Locklore, so those were out too.

I suggested a fidget spinner, but Rosemonde shot that idea down. Mel said that might have potential, but we’d need conditions to be right and a huge ad campaign. It definitely wasn’t the sort of thing we should focus on first.

Now, cans for canned goods? That idea had promise. We didn’t have anything to put in them, but other stores might be interested in those if this world’s technology advanced. It’d be great if the locals here could have access to preserved food. But...it felt like it would take a while to convince them of the practicality.

“Let’s go with ballpoint pens and bicycles! I know I can pull it off!” said Mel.

“...Hm, I don’t know. They sound pretty tough,” I said.

“Please...let me try! I need a big win against that sleazeball, Wantz! Not something that people try out and then decide if it’ll be useful, I need a hook!”

I understood that, but it didn’t make the process any easier.

“And thanks to all of you, I’m starting to have some hope! I can definitely win! I’m bursting with inspiration! The juices are really flowing! I’m unstoppable! We’re going to be super rich and take over Ploroque!”

“I’d really rather not...”

Just then, the bell chimed to signal the door had opened at the front entrance.

“Oh! A customer! Wait here a sec, I’ll go see!” said Mel happily as she stood and rushed to the front.

Then we heard the door slam shut, with what was clearly an unnecessary amount of force.

“Sounds like bad news,” said Rosemonde. She got to her feet. “I’m going to check it out.”

I went with her.

“It has been quite some time, little Miss Mel. And how is the shop doing?” said a thin man wearing a fine suit of formal clothing. There was something disquieting about his eyes. Behind him was a burly man with a thick beard.

“Y-y-y-yes, it has been, Mr. Wantz!” said Mel, her expression strained as she bowed over and over. As the “sleazeball con man” stepped into the shop, Mel’s courage vanished without a trace.

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“So, how is the shop?” asked Wantz.

“Ah ha ha ha... U-uh, well, there’s not many customers, uh, today. But thankfully, they’re coming in, here and there!”

“I think we can dispense with the pleasantries. I’m already aware The Pixie’s Wingbeats is not faring well. Which pains me, since I am the one who invited you here. It’s particularly unfortunate that other more well-known shops are monopolizing your customers and that several of your products were lost over the rights issue.”

“I-I’m still doing fine! Starting now I’m going to turn things around! Please just wait a little longer before you shut down my shop!” Mel desperately bowed to Wantz.

She’d called him a piece of garbage earlier, but now she couldn’t so much as lift her head when she found herself in front of him.

“What’s this about a *rights issue*? It’s the first time I’m hearing about it,” I quietly asked Rosemonde.

“This city has a law about who’s allowed to make what. It protects the big players that Grede & Co. favors. If you make a similar product without permission, the company will sue you and take your profits.”

This sounded like patents on Earth. Maybe Mel had a bad experience with that system, but it might actually work in her favor if she had her rights in order. If she made a revolutionary product in the future, she’d have a monopoly on it.

“Mel was being careful, but one of the bigger shops accused her of infringement and threatened to sue. Just being caught up in a rights dispute can be a huge hit to a shop’s profits and reputation. Mel didn’t have the cash to hire a lawyer, so she’d have to close the shop while she was in court. Besides, the judgment would be decided by some higher-up in Grede & Co., and I doubt they’d make a ruling that would benefit a newcomer. In the end, Mel just cried and handed over her items to have it swept under the rug.”

They’d turned the city’s rules into a weapon. Her shop might have been doing well, otherwise. The corruption here ran deeper than I imagined. Did we even have a chance in an honest fight?

“You know a lot about this, Rosemonde-san,” I said.

Ploroque wasn’t her hometown, and she wasn’t even a merchant, but she was still well informed about the rules and circumstances here. I could only

keep up because I knew about similar laws on Earth. Pomera seemed to be struggling to understand the conversation as she listened from the side.

Rosemonde nodded. “Manaloch’s kinda the same, since it thrives on alchemy. I also accepted a request to provide protection for a trading company once, and that got me dragged into a power struggle...so I had some basic knowledge. And I’ve been studyin’ up ‘cause I was trying to get Mel to open her eyes. Something felt wrong to me when I heard her story, so I started digging into it. I just kept finding fishy policies and rotten contracts till I was sick of it.”

Her heart shone through her rough persona like always. She’d really gone out of her way to help Mel.

“About that, Mel,” said Wantz, plastering a fake smile on his face. “There’s actually someone eager to establish a branch store in this location. They said they’re willing to pay quite the price if you act now. It could make a dent in your debts! I’m *truly* doing everything I can to get you the best possible deal. What do you think?”

“‘Act now’...” mocked Rosemonde. “He’s stringing that poor kid along without promising anything. These slimy types all sound the same, but he really is the perfect con man. Come on, Mel, don’t fall for it.”

“If I act now, it could make a dent in my debts?! Then I wouldn’t end up as a chopped-up corpse in the black quarter?!” Mel’s face beamed as she fell right into his trap, and Rosemonde let out a tired sigh.

“A chopped-up corpse?” asked Wantz. “Revoking registration with Grede & Co. does incur a penalty fee, and the company may have you work at a job they arrange to settle your debt, but...*chopped-up corpse* sounds a bit extreme. I can attempt to speak on your behalf. I promise I’ll do everything in my power for you.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Wantz! I don’t think it’s going to work out here!”

“I was the one who invited you here in the first place. I know a lot of this was sheer bad luck, but I do feel some responsibility. Now then, Miss Mel, if you sign here, I’ll start the process of—”

Rosemonde walked in between the two of them and snatched the paper from

Wantz.

“What are you...?!” he asked as she tore the paper into tiny pieces and threw them into the air.

“Ah, no no no! R-R-Rosemonde! What are you doing?! That’s my lifeline! I’ll end up in the black quarter without that!” shrieked Mel as she scrambled to gather up the scraps of paper.

“Wrong, kid. That was a one-way ticket to hell,” spat Rosemonde, then gave a snort of laughter as she glared at Wantz. “How many times are you gonna fall for the same tricks? Wantz is an important figure in Grede & Co.! If he really wanted to help you, he could have stepped up when you were hit with the rights violation.”

The large guard who was standing behind Wantz took a step forward. “Sounds like you’ve got something to say about my employer, woman.”

“Hold, Jude. I didn’t come here to fight.” Wantz held up a hand and stopped the large man. “Rosemonde, is it? You appear to be a wandering adventurer with some serious misconceptions about me. I think you’ll agree that you spoke quite rudely a moment ago. Such belligerence is needless, even if you do have doubts. I don’t know what backwater town you come from...but you aren’t from Ploroque. And if you intend to settle this by brute force, you’ll find yourself outclassed.”

His attitude was oozing with confidence and certainty as he tried to get under Rosemonde’s skin. There wasn’t a single hint of agitation even when faced with an angry sorcerer who had openly stated his true intentions. He seemed certain that he was in total control of the situation.

“Hmph,” grunted Rosemonde. “Everything about you rubs me the wrong way, bub.”

“Ah... You’re an understanding kind of person, aren’t you, Rosemonde?” said Wantz. “Believe me; I am not standing against Mel. I brought this proposal to her to reduce her losses. And Mel did accept the original contract, even if it didn’t end well. Failure and loss are always a risk when following a dream. Don’t you understand that you’re actually underestimating her resolve? The only people who aren’t asked to take responsibility for their actions are those who

were never responsible in the first place.”

Words flowed from Wantz’s tongue. With every fresh utterance, Mel’s face grew paler, and she shrunk back behind Rosemonde.

“Though, I suppose I can understand your desire to paint me as the villain, since you are her friend,” he continued. “You may do so if that will help her feel better. But shouldn’t we be thinking about Mel’s future? Shouldn’t you help her consider ways to limit the damage? Try not to let your emotions get the better of you. Think calmly about the pros and cons.”

“Are you done talking?” asked Rosemonde. “If so, then you can just turn around and walk back out. If you’ve really got Mel’s best interests in mind, then come back with another document and give her time to think without demanding her autograph on the spot. And listen: I’ll nitpick the *hell* out of that piece of paper.”

Wantz gave a sigh and tapped his temple with his finger. Rosemonde finally seemed to be getting on his last nerve.

“You have me backed into a corner. I assure you that I am not the enemy, but time is of the essence. I am a busy man, and frankly, I wish you wouldn’t waste my time with such pointless dithering. You may believe you’re acting in her interest, but your actions only tighten the noose around Mel’s neck.

“But very well,” he continued. “If your doubts are so strong, then I am perfectly happy to answer your questions. I just doubt it will be to your benefit, and I wonder what has a wandering adventurer so worked up.”

“Ha, you really find it hard to believe that I wouldn’t like an oily con man like you? It’s that simple. It’s all money, money, money, and more money with you. You think you’re smart, but you’re a fool. Don’t confuse ol’ Rosemonde for some dreamy-eyed girl from the country. You can’t pull one over on me. I might not like owing favors to that old fox Garnet, but he’s one of the greatest men in Manaloch. So, if you think you can talk your way out of this...go ahead and try, bub.”

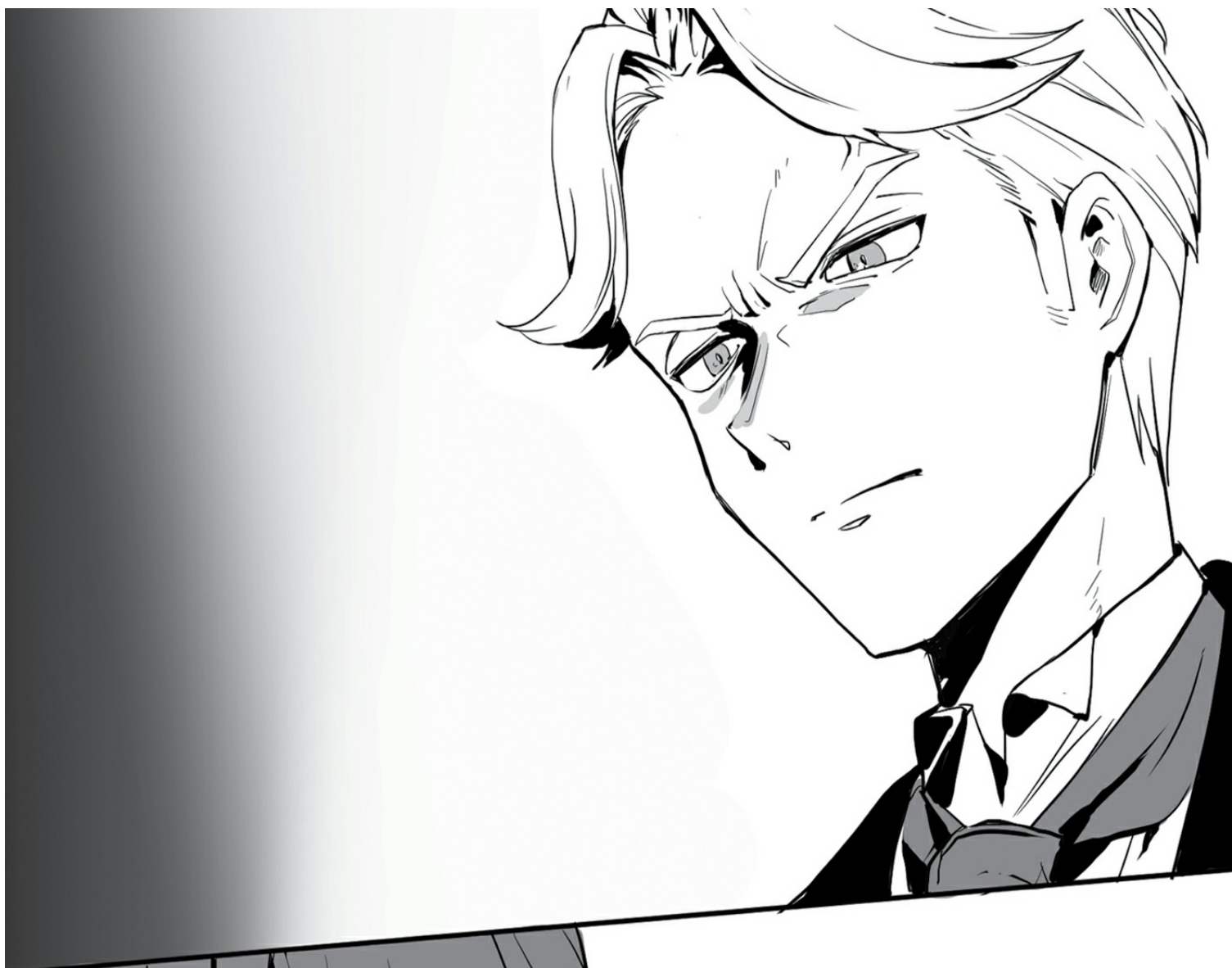
A vein throbbed in Wantz’s temple. “You are a stubborn, rude, and uncouth woman! What did you think would happen if you provoked me, you dumb ape? Well...now the situation has changed. Mel must return the land to me

immediately.”

“R-Rosemonde...” said Mel in a low whisper. “Don’t get involved anymore. He’s a really, really scary person. We don’t know what he might do to you...”

“And I was trying my hardest to resolve this peacefully since there is no profit to be gained from arguing,” Wantz continued to rant. “Any further goodwill on my part would be wasted in the face of this hostility. I certainly will not guarantee your safety if you accept my terms...but I can promise that *much* worse awaits you if you resist.”

Wantz’s gentlemanly expression had morphed into something cold and cruel. It was too hard to keep up the facade of good intentions when faced with Rosemonde’s stubbornness. He couldn’t stand the idea of being questioned by someone of a lower class.



“Struggling against the inevitable is futile, you witless primate,” he snapped. “You’re not the least bit cognizant of the future! Or do you really think you can triumph on the battlefield of Ploroque? I hate to face off against morons, it only results in loss for both parties, so—”

“Oh, but I do think,” interrupted Rosemonde.

“What?”

“I *do think* I can win against you, bub. And I hate people like you more than anything. Just you wait and see, pal. We’re gonna play by your rules on your home turf. And we’ll beat the snot out of you.”

“Well, well, how ominous. Our feelings are mutual. I will crush you under my boot like the insect you are.” Wantz turned back to his guard and said, “We’re done here for today. Let’s go, Jude.”

They turned to leave The Pixie’s Wingbeats, but Wantz chuckled darkly and muttered one final parting shot. “I hope you’re ready... The darkness of Ploroque is far deeper than you can imagine.”

“Rosemoonde!” wailed Mel as she flung her arms around Rosemonde. “I...I was so scared, but now I’m so happy! You’re going to fight for me! I swear...I absolutely will not quit and I will not hold back! I’ll risk my life knowing they’ll sell my organs if we lose!”

Rosemonde stood stock-still with her face ducked low.

“Rosemonde-san?” I asked as she turned slowly back toward me.

“I...I might have let my emotions get the better of me, kid,” she said. “Kanata, do you think there’s any way we can win? Be straight.”

“Rosemonde?!” shrieked Mel, her mouth agape.

“I-it’ll be fine, Mel! I’m the one who picked the fight! I’ll take responsibility for that. I make good money for an adventurer and...if it comes down to it, I’ll talk to that old fox Garnet and work something out.”

She was so sure of victory a moment ago, and now she was talking about how to handle things if we lost.

Wantz likely had every intention of destroying Mel no matter what path she took, but it might have been safer if we hadn't made such a fuss and left a door open for a peaceful solution. Maybe we could have negotiated better conditions after showing we were willing to resist.

"Well," I said slowly. "I understand how you feel, Rosemonde-san. I don't know enough about the situation, but I might have a few cards up my sleeve as long as we play them right. How about it? Let's play by his rules, on his home turf, and beat him. It wasn't my fight before, but it is now."

– 5 –

AFTER WANTZ LEFT, we restarted our meeting.

"A-anyway, I've come this far, so I might as well keep going!" said Mel. "We'll take Kanata's ideas and turn them into products, apply for the rights for them, and then dive into this fight! It's an assault from all sides!"

"Yay! Death from everywhere!" agreed Philia as she thrust a fist into the air.

"You're such a cutie pie, Philia! You heal my ravaged heart." Mel hugged Philia in her lap and cosseted her head. Philia leaned back against Mel, basking in bliss.

"Hee hee!"

"About product rights, they know we won't have the means to sue them," said Rosemonde. "We gotta dot all our Is and cross all our Ts so we can bluff our way through if it comes to that. Might be pointless, but it's better than nothing."

At the very least her suggestion might stall for time.

"Once we finish the applications, we should start teaching Mel some alchemy that might be useful. Right, Mel-san?" I asked. "We've gathered together all the ideas, so I have an inkling of what sort of alchemy might be useful. My teacher also taught me a good method for honing precise control of magic."

Mel was an artificer. She needed an absurd level of magic control, because using magic for fine adjustment was her bread and butter.

I could bump up her skills plenty in a couple of days if we used the Cocytus-style practice methods I learned from Lunaère, and that would work for both alchemy and item crafting. If Mel improved her abilities as an artificer, she could recreate some of the product ideas by using sheer force of will...even if the technology to create them wasn't developed yet.

And as much as I could help her with the alchemy right now, there was no point if Mel couldn't do it on her own in the end. She needed imagination to be an artificer. Mel would think more flexibly if she drew fully from her own alchemical knowledge without having to rely on my knowledge at crucial moments.

"I'm worried I won't be able to manage with just a crash course, but I'm also super happy!" said Mel. "I'll do everything I can, Kanata! I'm confident that I'm clever enough for this!"

"Kanata's magic training..." Pomera shuddered. "Are you sure, Mel? I wonder if you have what it takes."

"Pomera, you underestimate me! I mean, look...I've totally decided to put my soul on the line to fight that puke mess, Wantz! I could be burning alive or half drowned, and I'm still going to give my all to this training! If I have to offer up half my life span to a demon to get better skills, then I'll happily give it away!"

"Mel!" said Pomera, looking suddenly haunted.

Mel jumped slightly. "Uh... 'Demon' wasn't a good example. I didn't mean it like that! I was just trying to say that's how hard I'm willing to work!"

Pomera firmly gripped Mel's shoulders and brought her face closer. "You're more right than you even know. I'm asking seriously. Are you sure you're ready?"

"Y-you're scaring me, Pomera. You've got a really good poker face, eh heh heh..." Mel forced a smile, but Pomera's serious expression didn't change. "... You are *joking*, r-right, Pomera?"

I-I don't think she needs to be all that prepared for this, though... I thought. I

was surprised when I first started training under Lunaère, but I got used to it quickly. That was how I remembered it, anyway.

We continued our meeting in order to narrow down our ideas, then we all worked on filling out the rights paperwork with Mel's guidance. Our ship had truly set sail. We'd come this far—might as well see things through to the end.

"Y'know, this is kind of fun," said Pomera. "Maybe I'm more suited to office work than being an adventurer."

A strange thing for someone over level 1,000 to say with a smile on her face. She was probably one of the top ten most powerful people in the world. She could trounce any pack of normal monsters with her bare hands.

I suddenly felt bad for Pomera. I hadn't left her with many options for her life other than being an adventurer. No matter how hard she tried, office work would likely be nothing more than a hobby for her.

"Thank you so much!" said Mel. "Seriously, thank you all so much!"

"Hmph, I can't believe I'm doin' this nerd work," griped Rosemonde. "I want my cut of the profit when we win."

"Of course! I'm so happy you're being this kind! You in particular, Rosemonde. You've dealt with so much because of me! If the shop gets bigger and succeeds, I'll keep what I need to run the shop and a small amount for living costs, then divide the profits between the rest of you!"

"That's not what I meant, kid! Why do you always go to the extremes?!" shouted Rosemonde.

"Because I'm perfectly happy as long as I have this shop...and a reputation as the most stylish and cutely charismatic artificer with her own joint in the big city! Hee hee!" Mel wiped a drop of drool from her mouth as she let her fantasy overtake her.

How can she keep up this carefree act in a time like this?

"Once we get this paperwork submitted, let's jump into studying alchemy," I suggested. "We need to be fast, considering the situation."

“...I’m getting the vague feeling you’re eager to start, Kanata,” said Pomera suspiciously.

“You noticed? I actually had a lot of fun teaching you magic in Arroburg. It felt kind of, um, fulfilling. Maybe I really do like teaching people.” I smiled bashfully and scratched my head.

“Are you a sadist?”

“Wh-why would you ask that?”

Rosemonde watched our conversation with an unreadable expression.

“Please, Kanata! Please teach me alchemy!” said Mel as she clenched her fists in excitement. Pomera frowned with concern.

– 6 –

WITH THE PAPERWORK for the rights applications tidied away, we could begin Mel’s training at last.

“I’ll start by teaching you the basics,” I said.

“All righty, Professor Kanata!” she replied energetically.

“Don’t call me *professor*, either.” I held a hand up in midair. “Space-time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket.” I stuck my arm into the middle of the magic circle and pulled out a book on alchemy.

“You know, it’s really annoying when you use high-level spells like it’s nothing...” sighed Rosemonde.

“Wow! Rosemonde mentioned this...but, you’re really incredible, aren’t you?!” exclaimed Mel.

“Incredible...? He’s unreasonable,” Rosemonde muttered.

Mel looked at her with confusion, then stammered, “So, uh, th-that alchemy book looks more serious than I was expecting... Ah ha ha...it’s super thick. I don’t know if I can read it... I think what I need is, like, an intro to alchemy...”

“Oh, don’t worry, that’s not the primary text. There’s this one, and this one...” I said as I pulled book after book from my Dimension Pocket and stacked them up. Mel’s eyes grew wider still.

“Um, uh, Kanata? There’s more than ten books here... You gonna use these to play dominoes or what?”

“I have more, but it may take me a few moments to find them.”

“Eeek!” Mel took a big step back.

“Hey, Pomera...” said Rosemonde. “Is Kanata a genius or an idiot? How does he plan on getting a beginner alchemist through all those books in the time we got? Doesn’t he know the limits of what a person can do?”

“...I only *wish* that was the problem,” muttered Pomera darkly.

“Kanata... I, um, I reeeally don’t know that much alchemy...” said Mel. “I-I mean, item crafting covers alchemy a little, but...there is no way I can handle this...”

“You’ll be fine. I’ve got you covered,” I said. This time I reached into my magic bag and pulled out a necklace with a red crystal.

“Kanata, what is that...?”

“It’s an item that helps with learning magic. You can borrow it during training.”

THE SORCERER KING’S RESEARCH

Value Rank: Godly

This necklace contains the soul of a king who used magic to unify warring nations. The king devoted his entire life to the study of magic. Within this piece of jewelry, his eternal spirit never fades.

Enhances the wearer’s knowledge and understanding of magic.

With this, Mel’s learning ability would increase by an order of magnitude. She took it and reverently placed it around her neck.

“Whoa... Th-this looks pricey!” said Mel. “There’s so much power coming from it! I-I’ll use it with care. I feel like I’d never be able to pay you back for this if I damaged it.”

“Next...before you start studying, you should drink this potion. It enhances your sensitivity to magic and will help you understand the information in the magic books.”

I passed a vial of green liquid to Mel.

BLOOD ETHER OF THE GODS

Value Rank: Legendary

An elixir. Active ingredient: concentrated brain matter of high-level demons.

It is said to have a composition similar to the atmosphere in the gods’ realm, and it is rumored that an arch-mage once discovered hidden truths of this world after drinking it.

The drinker receives increased spell efficiency and greatly recovers MP.

I’d managed to make quite a few using alchemy, with Garnet’s help finding ingredients.

“There it is! Kanata’s doping up his students again!” said Pomera. She looked about ready to throw down, though I hadn’t the faintest idea why.

“A potion that enhances your ability to feel magic?” asked Mel. “You pull out one amazing thing after another, Kanata. Who are you, really...? W-well, I’d better accept your kindness. Bottoms up!” She brought the Blood Ether to her lips. “It’s bitter...but, yeah, it’s making me feel a bit smarter, I think. Hey, it’s working! I’m feeling pretty clever right now!”

That...was almost certainly a placebo effect. It didn’t start working *that* quickly.

“First time I heard of this...” said Rosemonde. “If that really is a thing, every top-tier magic user would want it. And me too, kid. Pomera, does it really work?”

How much would it go for? Maybe it's worth adding to The Pixie's Wingbeats' product lineup."

"Kanata said one vial might be around ten billion gold," said Pomera.

"Blergh!" Mel choked when she heard the price, green liquid dribbling from the corner of her mouth.

"H-hey, Kanata, are you serious?!" asked Rosemonde.

"I was just guessing. Give or take a zero," I said.

"W-we could've just sold one of those and solved this whole mess, guy! What the hell are you playing at?!"

"It's hard to talk about the price, and I was worried it might make the situation worse if I pulled out one of these without being careful..."

Besides, I didn't really get the impression we could just hand over some money and say, "Problem solved." If we were only trying to solve the immediate problem in front of us, Pomera and I could raise money to pay off Mel's debts. Then Rosemonde would probably come to the Garden of the Dragons with us like she promised.

But that didn't feel right. Mel would feel like she owed us, and I didn't feel good giving Wantz money and letting him off the hook. Obviously...if worse came to

worst and we had no other options, we could shift our strategy toward just paying him off.

At the moment, though, I felt I had the resources in hand to support Mel's dream. We had a decent chance of beating Wantz at his own game.

"Ack! I-I'm so sorry! I-it's a ten-billion-gold potion and I spit some out! Should I lick it off the floor?!" Mel's face was white. She dropped to the floor and stretched her tongue toward the splatters.

"No! Y-you don't have to worry about it! There's no way it'd actually sell at that price on the market anyway," I said.

...Maybe I should have told Pomera in advance never to mention the value of the Blood Ethers of the Gods.

“OKAY, are you good so far? Simply put, everything is composed of the elements, which are the basis for the universe. The elements are like the flow of magic itself and can be classified based on the composition of that flow and their state, as well their movement and magnitude. The smallest particle of matter is called ‘arche,’ and it’s formed from several different types of element. The alchemist Verbena advocated a method

of affecting the structure of an arche by interfering with the flow of the elements’ magic, thus changing a material at a fundamental level. However, since it’s not possible to make these adjustments on such a small scale one by one, you begin by building a mental model of a very small set region of the material and considering the state of the magic in that location, then apply the Verbena Formula. Simple, right?”

“Eeh...” Mel sounded like she was about to cry.

It was a good thing alchemy was the field she needed. White magic wasn’t my strong suit, so I could barely teach Pomera anything when she was studying. But I was fairly confident in my alchemy. Lunaère had trained me on most of it, after all.

“To simplify further,” I continued, “Let’s imagine an entirely flat world where time doesn’t flow. In this situation, the magic at the boundaries of the region will be represented by non-continuous magic formulas, due to the nature of the Verbena Formula. An arche has a stabilizing force which tries to maintain its original form via the flow of magic, which is why we use Ludgoria’s Approximation Formula in order to approximate the Shidoa Magic Structure. If we interpret the magic field made up by magic in that area, we can presume magic in the Roysen State has no energy. That means that under the Zeroid Condition we can expand the methodology of the alchemist Ceria’s Madoria Space into Palom’s Imaginary Dimensionless Space. You can see that broken down in *Figure 4* here...”

“Verbena...elements...Ludgoria...” Mel brought the book close to her face, her eyes vacant.

“You lost me, kid. Is she going to be okay?” asked Rosemonde as she looked at Mel with uncertainty.

“She should be understanding everything as she is right now. She has the Sorcerer King’s Research as well as potions that increase her focus, understanding, and intuition of magic,” I said. “And luckily, I’m pretty confident in my alchemy. At this rate, she should be able to get all the knowledge she needs by the time we finish today.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand... My head is superhot, and it hurts... It’s overheating from learning...” said Mel. Her head sank listlessly to the table.

Maybe I should have explained it a bit more simply...

“K-keep at it, Mel. Um, I went through this kind of magic training once. I’m glad white magic and spirit magic aren’t as complicated as alchemy,” said Pomera, trying to sound encouraging.

I wasn’t sure if Mel heard Pomera or not. Her cheek was pressed to the table, and she wasn’t moving. Her dead eyes stared into empty space.

“Maybe she didn’t take enough potions to improve her understanding,” I said.

“Y-you’re going to make me drink more?!” said Mel as she recoiled away and raised her arms defensively.

“I also have one that numbs your feeling of fatigue. Here, take this too.”

“Numbing?! Not *recovering*?! Am I gonna be okay?!” Mel looked doubtful.

It shouldn’t cause any serious problems with her body, but I could also give her the Ouroboros Wheel if she was uneasy. That would bring her back on the off chance something did kill her.

“Um, um...is it really...okay to have all these potions mixing inside me?” asked Mel. “They’re all, like, über powerful. Are you sure they won’t fuse into, like, some really big deal?”

“It’ll be fine. Probably.” Lunaère recommended this method and I didn’t remember anything bad happening to me. Or Pomera, for that matter.

“P-probably...? Um...my stomach’s bloated with liquid... It feels terrible, and the last thing I want is to drink more potions. Can I just...keep trying without taking any more?”

“If that’s the problem, I have a potion that’ll make you thirsty!” Pomera couldn’t keep downing potions during our previous training sessions either. So I tried making this with alchemy in the hopes of solving that problem. I was happy that a chance to use it came so soon.

“Eeek!” Mel fell from her seat and scooted away from me, then clung to Rosemonde for safety.

“K-Kanata, maybe you should wrap it up for today? Mel looks pretty tired,” said Rosemonde.

“But that’s why I have this fatigue potion...”



“I-I agree that you should stop here!” said Pomera, agreeing with Rosemonde. “Doping can be pretty grueling until you get used to it!”

Come to think of it, it was unpleasant until I got used to it too. Maybe that feeling got weaker over time, like how you forget how painful something was after it passes.

It made sense to feel reluctant or even stressed about chugging potions that directly interfered with your mind and senses, I supposed. And taking more potions to eliminate the stress of the first potions would only make those anxieties worse.

“Okay, should we stop here then?” I said.

“Thanks for caring about me, but I...I think I can keep trying a bit longer,” said Mel. “We don’t have much time to waste. And all of you are spending your time on this, I can’t drag it out...” She patted her cheeks.

“Mel-san!” I said.

“A-all righty! I’ve got my fire back! Now I can keep at it without drinking more potions! Throw everything you got at me! Everything!”

“You got it, Mel-san! Let’s keep moving on and get all these books covered by tomorrow!”

“Tomorrow?! O-okay! It’s crunch time! I-I totally got this!” cried Mel with desperation in her voice. Pomera and Rosemonde looked on in concern.

– 8 –

IT WAS THE NEXT DAY, after we’d spent all night on Mel’s alchemy training.

“Mel, you still alive and kicking, kid...? How’re you holdin’ up?” asked Rosemonde nervously.

“I’m okay,” Mel muttered in response as she continued reading an alchemy book. “I. Am. Unstoppable. I can see the world’s truth. I can see the past and

future. Rosemonde, do you know what that means? No. In order to discuss that, we would first have to clearly define what 'means' means. Since no individual can question it without their personal bias, it cannot be objectively known."

"Kanata, is she doin' okay?" asked Rosemonde.

"Yeah, she's great," I replied. "She powered through last night. I think she's got the basics."

It was looking rough in the early stages, but Mel made an incredible turnaround after midnight. She had the necessary ambition and tenacity; though she had been caught in Wantz's scam, she was incredible enough to be making waves out in the country as a genius artificer at her young age.

"That's not what I mean..." said Rosemonde.

"It looks like she's having a reaction to cramming all of that alchemy knowledge into her brain in a short time, which is on top of the potions' effects. It's been quite a trip, but she'll come down soon," I said.

"R-right." Rosemonde looked at Mel with obvious worry.

"Kanata, you're not allowed to teach me alchemy," said Pomera without hesitation.

I'd been hoping to do it at some point, but I guess she wasn't interested now. That was disappointing.

"Mel, you worked so hard! You're so smart! Good girl! Philia will pat your head!" said Philia, and Mel leaned down so Philia could pat her.

"Thank you, Philia! I feel like my soul finally came back to my body! Ooh, let's get married!" said Mel. She hugged Philia tight as the emotion returned to her face. They used cute, fuzzy animals for therapy and spiritual healing, right? Philia was clearly serving the same role for Mel.

"You look like you got some life back, kid," said Rosemonde. "So, uh, does that mean training is over? Time to restart The Pixie's Wingbeats."

"Her training for alchemy is over, yeah. Now we just have to do some training to increase her precision for item crafting."

“There’s more?!”

“This is where things kick into high gear, so I’ll need Mel to be fully prepared.”

“You’re saying this is the tough part?” Rosemonde planted her face into her with an agonized sigh.

I was. Alchemy was merely the appetizer for the artificing main course.

“Our schedule is looking okay. If we finish this in one day, then we can develop the products tomorrow. It’s going to be smooth sailing...you can leave it to me. You and the others can go sightseeing around Ploroque,” I said.

“I’m not sure this is smooth sailing. More like hanging on for dear life. Anyway, I’m not asking about the schedule, guy. Is *Mel* all right?” asked Rosemonde.

“She’ll be fine. I’ll use potions to make sure of it.”

“That’s what I’m worried about!”

Rosemonde and the others opted to stay in The Pixie’s Wingbeats. I started Mel’s item crafting regime with the three of them watching.

I took a silvery-blue lump of shining metal from my magic bag and handed it to Mel.

“I just have to manipulate this using magic? But that should be pretty simple. It seems like it has a pretty good magic throughput...” said Mel looking confused as she bounced the lump of metal around in her hand.

“Yeah, I’m not the greatest at item crafting, but my magic teacher told me I could use this if I was ever practicing,” I said.

The metal I gave Mel was a lump of zolapiras metal worked into a ball.

ZOLAPIRAS

Value Rank: Legendary

This metal was excavated from ruins three thousand years ago, though its intended use is uncertain. It is incredibly fragile and thought to be the stone that appears often in epic poems described as “more beautiful than the ocean

and softer than a baby's hand." Even so, no use for it has been discovered. Many believe it was created through alchemy for research.

"Uuuh... I guess I'll give it a shot then," said Mel.

She cupped the chunk of metal in her hands, and then it blew up like a balloon and shattered into pieces.

"Wh-what?! I only put a tiny bit of magic in it!"

That was the point. Zolapiras had a high magic transmission rate but was also incredibly delicate, making it easy to break. You would normally expect something with such a high magic transmission rate to be incredibly useful, but it was so fragile that it was practically worthless.

Even Lunaère had tried to make items from zolapiras but gave up when she wasn't getting anywhere. It sounded like she thought she could use it if she compensated for its fragility, but that would take so much time and effort that she might as well use a different metal. In the end though, Lunaère did actually find some value in zolapiras as a training aid.

"It's really fragile, so just trying to manipulate it without breaking it will build up your magical dexterity skills," I said.

The skills she needed as an artificer had to be incredibly precise. Her magic working skills would increase just from doing this over and over while taking potions that increased her focus and learning ability.

"C-can you even work this metal...?" she asked.

"My teacher would play with that, morphing it into different shapes, when she had nothing else to do." Lunaère used the lump of metal like a Rubik's cube to entertain herself. I remembered her making it into little statuettes of birds or copies of Noble.

"What sort of person was your teacher...? And wh-what do I do with this one, it's all crumbled..." Mel was frantically sweeping up the bits of zolapiras with her hands.

"Uuuh...if I remember correctly, my teacher squeezed it in her hands and

poured magic through it to stick it back together...”

“Oh, so it’ll go back to its original form! Mmph!”

The shattered bits of zolapiras exploded into even smaller fragments around her. She looked at the mess with dead eyes.

“Kanata... Uh, what do I do?”

At the rate she was going, she’d vaporize it next.

– 9 –

TWO DAYS PASSED since we started Mel’s training with zolapiras. I originally planned to finish it in a single day, but there had been some stumbling blocks.

Mel had done a complete one-eighty and decided she would never be able to do this if she didn’t rely on potions. She actively chugged one after another as we worked through the night. There was an ambitious streak in her. Last night, she even said it felt nice to take them as she improved.

The potions weren’t addictive...but I thought maybe I should make sure she doesn’t develop a habit.

“The training’s finally paying off! I successfully turned the zolapiras into a pretty shape!” she said proudly.

Rosemonde looked at Mel’s worked-upon zolapiras, and a dubious expression appeared on her face. It was neither a sphere nor a square but something in between. Something malformed and imprecise.

“Wow! You make such nice things!” said Philia with an innocent smile.

“Hee hee, I know, right?” said Mel. “I worked so hard. Keep those compliments coming!”

Pomera and Rosemonde gave me awkward stares in unison.

“Yeah, I think it’s incredible that you made it this far,” I said. “I underestimated zolapiras at first too. It was a way tougher medium than I’d

expected. You've made a lot of progress, Mel-san."

When I tried to put the zolapiras back together after it broke, it just exploded more, in the same way it did for Mel. Working with it required way more skill than I imagined. And somehow, Lunaère had formed detailed statuettes out of this like it was nothing.

"Now we can finally get down to the main event: developing new products for The Pixie's Wingbeats!" said Mel. "I feel like I can make anything now! We don't have time to waste! Having the shop shut for days will hurt my reputation. Our new grand opening will be tomorrow! Let's do this!"

She wiggled her fingers as she made her declaration. With a decent amount of alchemy knowledge, her skills as an artificer should be significantly improved. We'd put together a list of potential products, so all that was left was to make them and see how they took off in Ploroque.

A product should be practical and have a strong consumer demand. The problem was that our list as a whole was lacking in wow factor. They all stood a chance at success over time, but we didn't *have* time. Especially not with Wantz looming in the background to impede our efforts.

"I'm worried about our outstanding issues..." I said.

"It'll be fine!" snapped Mel. "I'm unstoppable! I'm gonna make The Pixie's Wingbeats a huge success to pay you back for all you've done! Just watch!"

Mel threw herself into crafting items. I worked as an assistant alchemist and idea generator for her since I was confident in my alchemy skills. An alchemical approach would let me think of ways to reduce labor and costs. It helped that I also knew what modern products should look like.

Rosemonde and Pomeria got the shop in shape for opening, and Philia was our resident hug therapist to help Mel recover her energy when she needed it.

We spent the full day making the bare minimum of items we needed to fill the shelves. To get people talking, we focused on making the greatest variety possible, rather than a large quantity of any single item.

Increasing Mel's knowledge and understanding of alchemy paid off, as well as increasing her skills as an artificer because she was able to recreate items I

thought were impossible. She created a ballpoint pen from my vague description of the thing—very impressive. She even successfully built a bicycle, though it was really only for publicity since she couldn't make them on a large scale yet. Amazingly, it actually worked as intended.

Soon the shelves were cheerfully lined with everything from clothespins to 3D puzzle toys.

“Kanata, do you really think we can win against the other item shops that Wantz is backing?” asked Rosemonde in a hushed tone.

“I think we've got a shot...but these things look less impressive than I was expecting.”

“Mmrgh...” Rosemonde groaned.

“B-but! I'm in it until we win it. We'll manage. I could even talk to Garnet-san and get some help from him.”

“The old fox...? I personally don't want to rely on him, but he's always got his eyes open for opportunities. He'd probably jump on board if he heard you were helping out an item shop in Ploroque. And if there's no other option...”

The problem was, the situation would likely get more serious if Garnet stepped in, seeing as he was the head of the Mithril Wand. If Grede, the local lord and head of Grede & Co. found out, he might interpret that move as Manaloch trying to muscle in on Ploroque. That would probably result in a lot of trouble.

“We could use the Mirror,” I said.

“What's that? Do you think it might give us a better shot to win?”

The Mirror was the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm. If we used that, we could bring Mel's level up into the hundreds overnight. That should enhance her alchemy and crafting skills and give her some breathing room.

“It'd be a brute force approach, but it might do the trick.”

“Full of surprises, aren't you, kid? Well, I'm counting on you.”

“If we did that, she'd be fine no matter what. Even if Wantz did throw Mel into the black quarter, she'd be the boss of the slums in three days or less.”

“*That’s* your backup plan?!” Pomera must have overheard Rosemonde and me talking. She forced a smile. “Let’s just hope we *don’t* have to use the Mirror.”

“Don’t worry!” cried Mel loudly. “This shop is stocked with wall-to-wall winners now! Everyone helped me so much! And I’ve got pride in my skills as an artificer, my talents, these products...and The Pixie’s Wingbeats!” She swelled with emotion as she spoke. “Obviously Kanata gave me the ideas for these, but I’m super, *super* confident in my designs and the craftsmanship that made them! This stuff rocks! No need to get all worked up over style with stock this substantial! I’m going to succeed, no matter what! Mel the artificer will not waste the kindness you’ve all shown me! I’m ready to fight! The only way is forward, and I won’t sweat the little details like back up plans or trickery!”

Her voice boomed with power. Mel knew she was succeeding in Ploroque before Wantz interfered with her business, and that was despite the fact that he brought her here assuming she would fail. And Rosemonde constantly went on about how talented Mel was.

I, on the other hand, got wrapped up in thinking about the results of our training over the past three days and whether we would win or not. But this was Mel’s fight. The rest of us were here to cheer her on, nothing more, nothing less.

“Mel-san, make sure you win this,” I said.

“Of course! I am super talented after all! I’m going to knock that piece of hot garbage Wantz out!”

– 10 –

THE SHOP OPENED for the first time in days. Rosemonde told me that the death knell had already rung for the shop, so I was surprised to see customers coming in in ones and twos as the morning went on.

Mel beamed as she dealt with the customers.

“Weird... We’ve barely even spread the news that Mel developed new items,” I said.

“What’s wrong? This is good, isn’t it? It’s definitely not bad...right?” asked Rosemonde cheerfully.

True, this was a good sign. But I couldn’t help thinking it was a fluke. It would take days before we saw results that were easier to interpret.

My predictions were off in a good way. Two hours passed, then three, and as time went by, the number of customers coming into the shop increased steadily. Customers were buying a mix of newly developed—albeit unexciting—products and those that Mel originally stocked her shop with. Soon the shelves were bare, and the shop had to close early.

“I can’t believe it went so well,” I said. “And here I was, thinking the ideas I gave you weren’t anything to write home about.” I was stunned, but I had a nagging feeling it was too good to be true.

“Hee hee, didn’t I tell you not to worry?” said Mel. “It’s a city of merchants. Everyone here heard the rumors, and they’re suckers for anything new and trendy. I knew I could get them flooding in here as long as I made something innovative.”

“Oh...”

I hadn’t considered that. There were a lot of merchants in Ploroque who kept their eyes peeled for trends and profit opportunities. They’d come to gawk if they thought there was a new product that could sell or was worth further study.

Now that she mentioned it, I realized there had been a lot of affluent people among the customers today. And that was even after you considered that Ploroque was a prosperous city.

“But even I didn’t think it would go this well,” said Mel with a bashful laugh.

Rosemonde came over with a large signboard in her arms and a frown on her face.

“What’s wrong, Rosemonde?” asked Mel. “We’re about to start a celebration

party for our victory, and you look gloomy.”

“Mel? Care to explain?” asked Rosemonde. The sign in her hands read *Other World Traveler Item Shop* in huge letters.

Mel looked about ready to burst with pride. “I figured this was the quickest way to get the word out to the people of Ploroque! And it’s truth in advertising!”

“You were talking about having pride in your shop, and then you went and covered your shop’s name?! I thought it was substance over style, kid!”

“W-well, the products weren’t really *that* exciting... You don’t have to get angry at me!”

“I’m not angry. I’m *pissed*!”

“Uhhh...isn’t that basically...?”

I felt myself deflate as they argued and couldn’t stop a sigh from slipping out.

“The problem is that you put this up without talking to us first!” shouted Rosemonde.

“Well, it was after I said all that stuff about being proud and I was embarrassed,” Mel whined.

“Kanata’s intentionally tryin’ not to broadcast to the entire world that he’s a traveler, and you went and did *this*!”

“I-it’s okay, Rosemonde-san, I don’t really mind,” I said. It seemed Mel had the same misgivings that I did, even if she’d kept a positive attitude when talking about it.

At least The Pixie’s Wingbeats had a grand reopening.

– 11 –

WANTZ

THREE DAYS AFTER Mel reopened her item shop called The Pixie’s Wingbeats,

Wantz visited the head of the company at its headquarters.

“Wantz... You missed something in your report,” said Grede, head of the company and lord of the merchant city of Ploroque.

Grede was of portly stature and fairly old, but his weight kept the wrinkles from his face and gave him a look of false youth. He wore an elegant tailcoat and a black hat on his head. His sly, narrowed eyes bore straight into Wantz’s face.

“Hmm...wh-what are you referring to? O-oh... The Pixie’s Wingbeats, perhaps?” said Wantz with a flattering smile.

“It appears the girl hired a traveler for her shop and is now doing quite well,” said Grede. “Fewer customers are visiting your group of stores that were trying to drive her under. Seems you might take a loss. On top of that, you’ve constantly harassed her with morally questionable actions, which might see the light of day given her sudden success.”

Wantz had wanted to avoid this topic. The potential financial loss he might incur as a result wasn’t significant, but the incident would ruin his reputation and cause him embarrassment.

“Ha ha... It’s not a serious issue, Lord Grede,” said Wantz. “Scarcely worth reporting. I essentially got nipped by a stray dog while trying to make a little extra money. It does pain me that I won’t be able to recover that property, but I shall carry on.”

Grede remained silent, staring into Wantz’s face.

Wantz felt trapped. He’d been working under Grede for quite some time now but was constantly worried he might step on a land mine. There was no telling what Grede would do if he became enraged.

He was a cruel and callous man—and the absolute authority in this city. There was a tacit understanding among the higher ups in Grede & Co. that Grede had connections with the criminal organizations in the black quarter. People whispered that he could kill a person in broad daylight without the incident ever being reported.

Wantz was particularly close to Grede, and he knew his lord drove people into

bankruptcy and intentionally destabilized the security of the black quarter in order to facilitate his shady business. An enemy wouldn't make it out of the city in one piece if they caught Grede's attention.

"E-even if I can't recover the property, the shop owner, Mel, is immobilized by Grede & Co. regulations," said Wantz, his words coming quickly. "Contracts and agreements are complicated in this city. No outsider can navigate them confidently. I'll draw off her profits in some way or another, and she'll be mine in the end. It's not the end of the world. One little shop like that is trivial to us, after all."

It was true that Grede & Co.'s systems were byzantine. Should an outsider luck into momentary success, more and more of their profit would be siphoned off by the company in proportion to the shop's value. There were several ways of mitigating those attacks, but only if the person knew the rules thoroughly. It wasn't the sort of thing a country bumpkin could evade with a few nights of studying.

It did hurt Wantz for an outsider like Mel to take up space in one of the best areas of Ploroque, worsening the business conditions for shops in his cartel. But it was a trifling loss of money in the bigger scheme. As he said, it was a mishap on par with being nipped by a stray dog.

"Ah, yes. Not significant," said Grede. "But when will you get rid of this stray dog, Wantz?"

"W-well, I'm not in any particular hurry—"

"Your opponent is a mangy mutt, isn't she? And you'd let her set up shop in your territory? You say it's not a big deal...so deal with it quickly."

"But the money...it's honestly a pittance. I'd lose more by fighting—"

"Wantz, I don't need a loser working under me. I'll say it again: you say it's not a big deal, so deal with it quickly."

"O-of course, Lord Grede. If that is your desire, then I will immediately prepare a method for crushing them." Wantz bowed several times to Grede.

"Wantz, do you know why I value you?"

“B-because I have never suffered a serious defeat in Ploroque?”

“There is that. But it’s not the main reason.” Grede shook his head, then his lips curled into an evil grin. “It’s because I want to watch. I love to watch comical and pathetic humans succumb to their greed, fight, struggle, and suffer as they fall to ruin. It makes my heart race to watch you treating people as nothing more than a way to earn a little extra cash. A success story about a little girl from the country on the other hand? That bores me to tears.”

Each word Grede spoke dripped with pure venom. In the face of that, Wantz felt nervous sweat eke from every pore on his body.

“I-I will use whatever means necessary to destroy that girl, then,” said Wantz. “Obviously, I can easily destroy a tiny shop like that if I wish to expend the effort. If those are your intentions, Lord Grede, then have no fear. She will be finished in a matter of days.”

“Mm, I look forward to it, Wantz.” Grede’s face split into a wide, unpleasant smile.

Wantz’s breath caught in his chest. He had worked with Grede for a long time, but he felt uncomfortable in his presence. Grede was not a straight and proper person...he hardly felt human. Wantz couldn’t help feeling like he was standing face-to-face with some monster of great evil.

He’s a fiend decaying from old age, both hating and envying the young, thought Wantz bitterly as he bowed to Grede and turned around.

“Wantz. Bear in mind that I said I want to watch the destruction of greedy humans. Whether it’s some rube from the country or *you* makes no difference to me,” said Grede.

Wantz jumped and spun to face Grede.

“Ha ha. Just a jest, Wantz. Do your best, now. I look forward to your next report.”

“Ah...ha ha. Ha.” Wantz forced a smile onto his face.

WANTZ

TWO MEN STEPPED into the item shop known as The Pixie's Wingbeats.

"Ooh, more customers," called Mel as she came to the front of the shop. "I'm sorry, the shop is closed. We'll open again tomor..." Her words trailed off when she looked up at their faces. "Mr... Mr. Wantz."

"It's been a few days, Mel. I'm glad to see the shop is looking busy."

Wantz and Jude stood in the doorway. Wantz seemed polite once again, despite his behavior the last time they met. Mel bit her lip and looked up into his face.

"Please don't glare at me like that," said Wantz. "I got a little overemotional last time and treated you with disdain, but I never believed you would succeed as much as you have. I said hurtful things, but I hope you will allow me to take those back. You've won, Miss Mel." He let out a tired sigh.

He had his orders from Grede and needed to destroy The Pixie's Wingbeats as quickly as possible. He could try to sue her for rights infringement, but the shop had already become too well known since it brought on a traveler from another world and created innovative items. With all that attention, trying to sue for rights could easily backfire.

Specifically, The Pixie's Wingbeats already had plenty of extra money and potential for future profits. Wantz could imagine Mel filing countersuits and slowly bleeding him dry. And since he'd used that strategy once before, Mel's rights paperwork this time was undoubtedly flawless. No, nothing lay down that route but a dead end.

As things were, his options for attacking The Pixie's Wingbeats were limited. He had several strategies he could use to whittle her down over time, but that wouldn't satisfy Grede. And with The Pixie's Wingbeat's current state, there was a good chance Mel would find support and investors in Ploroque. Then if he made a bold move, it might cast a shadow over his own enterprises.

"I-I win...? Then...you won't do anything to The Pixie's Wingbeats anymore?" asked Mel.

He didn't answer her question. Rather he said only, "Jude, the paperwork."

Jude nodded and took out some paper from the briefcase Wantz had him carry. Wantz inspected it briefly, then showed it to Mel.

"What's this?" she asked.

"I'm offering a significant sum to buy you out. I would like you to leave Ploroque and never return. Ploroque has been built up as a merchant city whose economy functions efficiently atop elaborate calculations. We cannot allow foreign industry to become the center of a sector of commerce."

Mel timidly took the papers, her eyes darting back and forth as she read. "That means...it didn't go as you planned. You're trying to make it all disappear with money even though you're the one who picked the fight?!" Her bewilderment was tinged with outrage. Wantz's arrogance made her cringe, but what appalled her was how little he seemed to regret any of his actions.

"Yes, that is the gist of it," he said. "I won't make excuses. Things didn't play out how I envisioned, so I'm going to use money to overturn the table and end the game. If we continue...both you and I will be swallowed by the darkness of Ploroque."

Wantz had no desire to continue this petty fight the moment Grede interfered. Residents of this city couldn't afford to risk angering its kingpin. All Wantz had to do was bribe Mel to leave, then tell Grede she caved to his threats.

Mel didn't respond immediately. She took her time to carefully read through the paperwork. This was Wantz, after all. Before she even considered accepting his offer or turning it down, she assumed there was some sort of trap.

Wantz's brow furrowed as he watched. "You don't seem to understand the situation. It won't be just a game after this, it will be a fight to the death. If you don't sign this now, you will leave me with no other choice!"

The door opened in the back, and Rosemonde peaked her face inside. "I was wondering what was keeping you. These guys again, huh." She strode over to Mel, snatched the paperwork from her, and tore it to pieces once more.

Wantz's eyebrows shot up. "Y-you—! Do you not understand?! Opposing me

is the same as turning a blade toward Lord Grede himself!”

“Ha! Of course I don’t understand. I don’t care either,” said Rosemonde. “Listen, bub: there’s no reason for us to listen to a con man ever again.”

“You fool! You will ruin everything! If you were unsatisfied with the amount, I could double...no, *triple* the offer! But we can’t even have a discussion if you tear it up before looking at it! Can’t you see this harms us all?!”

“You’re the fool. Why would I listen to anything a con man says? There’s not a single reason why we should trust you.” Then Rosemonde turned to Mel and said, “Mel, I don’t know what nonsense he’s trying to sell you, but you don’t have to consider any of it. In the past couple of days, he’s sent his goons to scope out our shop. This is just another scheme to take us down.”

“Th-this won’t end nicely if you force my hand!” said Wantz. “*This* is why amateur merchants cause so much trouble! Both parties will incur losses if they can’t back down!”

“You said the same thing before,” said Rosemonde. “Negotiations are built on trust, pal. And we don’t trust you.”

“Grr...urgh...” Wantz’s face turned scarlet, and he seemed to be at a loss for words.

Trapping Mel was the last thing on his mind at the moment. He simply wanted to finish this mess with the least risk to himself, even if that cost him a pretty penny. But Wantz hadn’t anticipated that their complete lack of trust would prevent them from taking an obviously beneficial offer.

“Insulting wench! Stop interfering!” said Jude as he lunged to grab Rosemonde. Wantz hadn’t come here with the intention of using force, but Rosemonde’s behavior had infuriated Jude nonetheless. As long as that obstinate woman was there, this conversation was going nowhere.

Rosemonde easily evaded the oncoming hand and sent Jude tumbling with a fast tackle.

“Argh!” Jude stumbled back and fell to the ground, taking Wantz down with him. The duplicitous merchant was squashed beneath his bodyguard’s massive frame.

“Gah! G-get off! It hurts!”

“I-I’m sorry, Mr. Wantz!” Jude scrambled to his feet and pulled Wantz up behind him.

“Ha!” Rosemonde snorted with derisive laughter. “I’m an A-rank adventurer. You’ll need to do better.”

He stared at her for some time, then let out a deep breath, and relaxed the scowl on his face. “It is unfortunate that you did not accept my offer. Now I have no other options. I hope you regret your actions.”

With that, he leaned on Jude’s shoulder, and the two walked out of The Pixie’s Wingbeats.

Once they’d put some distance between them and The Pixie’s Wingbeats, Wantz and Jude discussed the situation.

“Mr. Wantz...what’re we going to do next? I don’t think we have many options left...”

“We have no choice. With things as they are now, I have to do what I said and go at her with everything. She must be destroyed without concern for the rules. Though it pains me...we’ll ask Isabella for help.”

“I-Isabella?”

Isabella was another important figure in Grede & Co., and something of a rival to Wantz. She was skilled at reading the flow of commerce and manipulating the market. Not only was she a prominent merchant, but she had such a knack for manipulating her surroundings to follow whatever scenario she envisioned that she earned the nickname “The Playwright.”

“Loath as I am to call on her, I have no other choices. After that, I’ll have to send out the criminal organization in the black quarter...the Bloodied Coin.” Just as Grede had connections in the black quarter, Wantz had a criminal organization he entrusted with his dirty work.

“Couldn’t it go bad if you aren’t careful about sending them?” asked Jude. “And if anything happens to that shop at this point, won’t that look suspicious?”

“We won’t attack her out in the open. I’ve already thoroughly investigated weak spots in The Pixie’s Wingbeats. It’s not as if I never considered the possibility they might refuse.” An evil smile grew on Wantz’s face.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll drive off the traveler that’s helping the girl. He has a little girl with him named Philia. I’ll send the Bloodied Coin to kidnap her and use that as leverage. The Bloodied Coin is used to this sort of work. They do it well and without drawing attention.”

“Ah! You’re always a clever one, Mr. Wantz!”

“The fools have signed their own death warrants. They will pay for underestimating me. They’ll regret their decision to spit on my proposal while they rot in hell.”

Wantz capped off his declaration with a shrill cackle.

– 13 –

WANTZ

AFTER BEING CHASED out of The Pixie’s Wingbeats by Rosemonde, Wantz went to visit Isabella, a heavyweight merchant in Ploroque. Her legendary manipulation skills over the local economy—much like those of a skilled writer assigning roles and lines to characters—had earned her the nickname “The Playwright.”

“My, my, Wantz. I knew you were up to something, but you’ve put me in quite the spot,” she said. She covered her mouth with her right hand and giggled.

The head of Grede & Co. was of course Grede, but he had his duties as lord and focused on controlling the criminal organizations of the black quarter from behind the scenes. This meant his involvement with the company had lessened over the past few years. Many claimed that Isabella was who presently held the reigns of Grede & Co.

Isabella was usually a thorn in Wantz's side, since she was always one step ahead and stealing his profits. But the situation was dire. His position would only worsen if he left the problem of The Pixie's Wingbeats to fester. The incident had already drawn the displeasure of Grede, and now he needed to solve the situation by any means necessary...even if it meant owing Isabella a favor.

Wantz sighed, not even trying to hide his utter fatigue. "I have no response," he said. "I'm sure you already have a general understanding of the situation? If The Pixie's Wingbeats continues to prosper, the twisted nature of the contract between Grede & Co. and Mel will be plain for all residents of the city to see. Mel surely harbors ill feelings toward the company, and I can't make a careless move because she has attracted the support of some powerful people. It could turn into quite the issue, were she to launch a serious attack against me. For his part, Lord Grede doesn't approve of the idea of an outsider throwing their weight around in the city without some sort of leash to control them."

"And so you came crying to me. Ha ha. I'm just not sure... What's in it for me to harass this little girl? And I don't underestimate you, Wantz. What's to say you haven't already made a plan to attack me the moment my guard is down?"

"Cynical witch! You think I can afford that sort of risk at the moment?!"

"You've really stuck your foot in it this time, haven't you, Wantz?" Isabella's smile gleamed in the dim lamplight.

Wantz bit his lip in annoyance, then said, "What's your price? I don't have time for us to stand here playing our usual games. Lord Grede is waiting in the wings!"

"I know. I'll give you information, and I'll act as well. But Wantz...I want you to show me your hand. Not only your shops—I want to know what rights you hold under other names, how far your influence spans, and what criminal organizations you keep as pets. That should be enough to let me crush this girl with as little effort as possible, *and* ensure you can't strike me while I'm open."

"What?!"

If he let Isabella in on everything, he'd be under her thumb forever. It would be an irreversible setback in their constant battle. It was as though a fist was

tightening around his heart; if he didn't play this right, the damage would be irreparable. He'd be little more than Isabella's puppet.

"It's your choice, Wantz," said Isabella. "This Mel girl is your problem, not mine. I won't stick my neck out where you can chop it off and I won't help you at all if I suspect you're lying. I think that's a fair and generous offer, all things considered."

"Fine. I accept your conditions," said Wantz weakly.

Mel was just a country bumpkin with a bit of skill, but she'd gained significant power in the past few days. She had Kanata, a traveler from another world, and Rosemonde, an A-rank adventurer from Manaloch. Wantz's guard Jude had failed to keep tabs on them, particularly that Rosemonde. She wasn't an enemy who your average black quarter thugs could take out quietly.

Mel herself had obviously made significant advancements with her artificer skills. This wasn't a case of ending a creative slump or a sudden spurt of practice. This was unprecedented growth that he couldn't afford to ignore.

There were even rumors they had connections with Garnet, the head of the Mithril Wand and an important figure in Manaloch. In the worst-case scenario, this could cause a diplomatic incident.

Wantz would never have made a move against them if he'd known that these sorts of terrifying connections were in the cards. If Mel's steady progress continued, Wantz could find Grede gunning for *him* instead of her. He wouldn't be fighting for his status at that point, but for his very life.

"I accept all your terms," said Wantz. "But in return, you *must* destroy The Pixie's Wingbeats."

"I understand. You of all people should know how good The Playwright is: I always look two moves ahead. You were wary of my skills as my enemy, so please trust in them just as much as an ally." She smiled sweetly.

"Hmph, the price is high, but I do trust it will be worth it, Isabella. This will finally calm my heart and let me sleep peacefully at night."

“...And that’s the story, Mel.”

“A-ah... Ah.” Mel blinked several times in a daze as she listened to Isabella, the merchant who’d suddenly barged into The Pixie’s Wingbeats.

She was having a hard time swallowing the whole situation. I was too.

Isabella was apparently some famous merchant of the city. Mel recognized her. She’d come to the shop with her bodyguards—nearly forcing her way inside—then immediately revealed the entire story about Wantz asking her to destroy Mel before we could so much as ask her name.

I was thankful for the tip, but I had no idea what she was after. “So...Isabella-san, was it? Why are you outright telling us this? Are you telling us to surrender?” I asked, since Mel was so taken aback she couldn’t say anything.

“No! What? You really haven’t figured it out?” asked Isabella with exasperation. Or perhaps it was surprise.

“I’m sorry, I’m not good with this kind of thing. I need people to spell out what they mean,” I said.

“Look, I’m betting on the winning horse. There’s no point getting worked up and destroying a merchant who has sense, skill, knowledge from another world, a growing shop, and connections to another city. You’re certain to win if I invest in you,” said Isabella clearly.

I-is she serious? This could be another trap.

“Maybe you’re just going to tie our hands with a contract, then destroy us...”

“What would I gain from that? It’s more beneficial to me if we cooperate and you to keep up the energy, rather than me spending resources to throw you into debt and destroy you. And I don’t remember doing anything to make you hold a grudge toward me! You can get as powerful as you like and it doesn’t inconvenience me at all. Wantz is the only one who’s in hot water. Lord Grede is angry at him because he lost to a girl from the country. Everyone else is fine.”

“R-right.” I didn’t think Isabella was lying.

She seemed to be trying to negotiate a contract of cooperation. Did she really believe it would be much more damaging to her if she made a poor attempt at

some tricks? We'd lose trust, and the whole thing would fall apart, that's for sure.

"O-okay then, why'd you agree to work with that buttho—I mean, with Mr. Wantz?" asked Mel.

Isabella nodded. "Because now I know what cards he has in his hand. So long as he's relying on me, I can shut down any moves he makes. But it will take time to build a countermeasure against the criminal organizations, so our only option now is to make sure the shop is thoroughly protected. And you shouldn't go walking around outside too much, Mel."

She's being way too helpful...

Could we really rely on her? I heard she manipulated the market so beautifully she earned the nickname "The Playwright." I felt like I understood how she got that name.

– 14 –

THE SHOP WAS BUSY. Mel and Pomera worked up front while Rosemonde and I heard all the details from Isabella.

"You're offering a large investment, distribution deals, advertisement, and legal review of any Grede & Co. contracts that Mel has...it sounds too good to be true," said Rosemonde as she ran her eyes across the papers Isabella gave us. "You're in the same line of work as Wantz, aren't you? I can't figure out why you'd bother to do this."

"Because I see profit in it," said Isabella. "You don't last in Ploroque if you're naive enough to think you can squeeze an opponent who's got resources and is ready to go to war. I never would have worked my way up to number two in Grede & Co. if I was that inefficient."

"Seems like you're tryin' to sweet-talk us into jumping in bed with you. Good thing we kept Mel out of this discussion. She'd dive right in," Rosemonde said with a sigh.

True... If this were Mel, she would have been ready to sign on without a second thought. She'd become more skeptical after Wantz deceived her, but part of her would forever be weak to praise. Rosemonde knew that well.

"Let me lay it out for you. This shop is like a diamond in the rough right now. Actually, more like a whole diamond mine. No other merchants have approached you just because Wantz and Lord Grede have their eyes on you, so they can't, but trust me—they would have. But if you join with me now, I don't have to beat the crowd after you inevitably beat Wantz," said Isabella. "I don't mind you taking a portion of the investment funds up front if that sweetens the deal. That'll keep others in check because they'll know I've marked my turf."

Rosemonde groaned.

"Rosemonde-san," I said. "I do think we have to take time to think this over, but she did come to negotiate without trying to strong-arm us, didn't she?"

"Kid, this is like walking into a spider web. If you can't see it, it just means she's a *good* spider..." Rosemonde brought her face close to eyeball the papers.

She's kind of going overboard with the paranoia, isn't she? Though, maybe we should be this suspicious considering what just happened with Wantz.

"Hang on!" cried Rosemonde. "Isabella, you said Grede is angry, but you don't seem to be taking that seriously at all. You're basically saying you don't think you'll get in trouble for covering Mel because this started out as Wantz's mistake. C'mon. It can't be that simple. What's the catch?"

"Lord Grede is angry that Wantz failed in his cheapskate attempt to earn a bit of money, which is disturbing the power within the company. He was warned for how clumsy he was being. Besides..." Isabella glanced around us and lowered her voice. "...He might not look it, but Lord Grede is getting old. He's going senile. I'm the one with the real power."

"Ms. Isabella, you shouldn't say that!" Isabella's guard hurried to stop her, but she ignored him.

"I've been making good use of my reputation to put down deep roots, so Lord Grede won't see me as an enemy. I doubt he would have found fault with me even if I hadn't bothered with that though. He barely has any interest in the

company now except for his pet projects. He has his duties as lord, but that's not all that's to blame. All he does in the company is make odd rules and gloat over stories of merchants whose dreams were shattered. It's all just entertainment for him."

"S-so that's what it's like..." I murmured.

Grede was a merchant of legend who'd built up the city and taken control as the local lord. I thought he would be as ferocious as ever, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"He pours all his power into his connections with the black quarter," continued Isabella. "He seems to be focused on concealing just how bad the area is, as well as his black magic research. All the higher-ups gossip about how he must have used black magic because he looks young even though he's supposedly over eighty years old."

What a strange situation.

Isabella was the true leader of Grede & Co., and she wasn't going to let an aging and enfeebled Grede boss her around. But if what she said was true, the situation was volatile. We'd be throwing our lot in with the quickly growing Isabella faction. We wouldn't have to fear Wantz or Grede at all...or would we?

"He's not married and has no heir," said Isabella. "What will happen to his estate and product rights when he dies? And what about the fruits of all his evil labor? His influence is still excessively powerful, but... Honestly, I feel bad for Wantz. All he concerns himself with is managing Lord Grede's temper."

"He's thrown himself into black magic and is destroying himself..." I muttered.

How did that happen to Grede, a man who accumulated endless successes in only a single lifetime? Perhaps he built success *because* of the black magic.

"The royal knights have been sniffing around Ploroque lately," said Isabella. "I know because I've been cooperating with them. It looks like they're planning on arresting Lord Grede in the near future. He's built a criminal organization and conducts illegal experiments on the land the royal family entrusted him to, after all. You don't have to worry about him."

"Th-the city's that unstable? I had no idea..." I said.

“I’m telling you all of this up front because I’ve decided you should know the truth going in. I won’t ask for an answer today, but I hope to meet with Mel again soon. I’m expecting a good outcome.”

I didn’t sense any hidden meaning behind Isabella’s words. She took her guards and left The Pixie’s Wingbeats.

“Rosemonde-san, don’t you think we can trust what Isabella-san says?” I said as I watched the two leave.

“I want to spend a day thinking on it, but honestly...yeah.” Rosemonde nodded. “But something still smells fishy. Grede’s obsessed with suspicious magic, and the knights are going to arrest him soon? Don’t matter how much the man’s weakened—he’s still the beast that guided Ploroque to become the great city it is in less than sixty years. He’s not the sort of mastermind to go quietly. I hope nothing strange happens...”

Chapter 3:

The Lord of Merchants and the Girl of Dreams

– 1 –

PHILIA

THE PIXIE'S WINGBEATS was busy.

Kanata, Mel, and Rosemonde took Isabella's advice and went around town together, meeting with influential merchants. Only Pomera and Philia stayed in The Pixie's Wingbeats. Philia couldn't be asked to deal with customers, meaning Pomera was handling them on her own.

"That's weird..." said Pomera. "No matter how much I count the money, it doesn't add up. Did I make a mistake when I was rushing around dealing with the customers before?" She looked weary as she desperately recounted the coins.

"Pomera, that looks hard... Are you okay?" asked Philia.

"I'm okay, Philia. I mean, it is a little bit of a problem... But they're apparently working on getting more help for the shop through Isabella's connections. The rest of us will have time to relax once the talks finish up."

They were initially going to support Mel until she got her shop back on its feet. At this point, the shop was well past sprinting along, and the sudden growth meant it lacked employees to handle everything. Kanata and the others were still lending a hand while that issue remained.

Mel was ambitious but naive, and they didn't want Grede & Co. taking advantage of her. The plan was for Isabella to step in to help with that as well. Kanata planned on stepping back from The Pixie's Wingbeats once Isabella proved to be trustworthy.

Kanata's original goal was to get Rosemonde to come with them to the Garden of the Dragons so that they could draw information about the Unseen

Hand of the Gods from Ramiel. Now Rosemonde shouldn't have any complaints about that trip, considering what they'd accomplished for Mel.

"Hey, hey! Pomera! Philia will help too!" said Philia.

"I think it's a little too tricky for you, Philia." Pomera gave a painstaking smile.

Philia responded with a pout, "Philia wants to help everyone!"

"I'm sorry, I'm just busy right now... We'll play once I'm done, okay? Right now, you can help by being good."

"Hmph..."

Just then, the customers started to line up in front of Pomera again.

"A-ah! No time to chat!" said Pomera in a panic. She focused on her first customer. Philia scowled and pattered around the store with nothing to do.

"Bored..." she said.

Two people, a man and a woman, stepped in front of Philia, blocking her path. "Are you Philia?" asked the woman.

"Hm...? Y-yeah, Philia is Philia..." she replied.

"Something bad has happened, and your friend asked us to come get you right away. Will you come with us?"

"S-something bad? What happened to Kanata?"

The two of them exchanged meaningful glances, then the woman said, "Yes... Kanata. He's in trouble right now. Okay, let's go then." The woman grabbed Philia's hand and started pulling her along.

"But if something happened to Kanata, then Philia has to tell Pomera..." said Philia as she glanced in Pomera's direction. Pomera was in the middle of attending to customers. It didn't look like a good time to talk.

"I just need you to come with us right away. Okay? Come on, quickly!" said the woman.

"O-okay... If Kanata needs Philia. Maybe it's an alchemy thing...?"

Philia was hustled out of The Pixie's Wingbeats by the pair, no wiser to what

was happening.

They quickly moved away from the brilliant and bustling main streets to an alley with far fewer passers-by and a decidedly creepy atmosphere hanging about it.

Philia looked around uneasily. "Um, where's Kanata...?"

Neither of the two people replied.

"Hey! Is Kanata okay? Hellooo!"

"Shut up, brat. Just come along and be quiet," said the man beside her. His intimidating attitude was a stark contrast from before.

"S-sorry..." said Philia as she lowered her head with some confusion.

"You don't think anyone saw us, do you? Kidnapping a kid from the front of a shop is against the rules even in the black quarter. It'd be bad if this turns into a whole thing," asked the woman in a low, quiet voice.

"It's fine. Or did you forget who asked us to do this job?" The man spoke just as quietly. "Ha ha, but seriously... They left this kid on her own after picking a fight with Wantz. Pretty stupid of them. They oughta be more careful. It was just too good an opportunity for us, what with that dangerous A-rank adventurer nowhere in sight."

These two were members of the Bloodied Coin, a powerful criminal organization in Ploroque's black quarter that worked for Wantz. They manipulated the city's market by force from the shadows by taking requests from big-time merchants.

"That adventurer... I hear she's pretty feared in Manaloch," said the woman. "They call her Annihilation Rosemonde. It could get rowdy if she shows up, don't you think?"

The man snorted. "Ha, her hands are tied. We've got a hostage. Besides, did you forget who our leader is? Mardas, the Laughing Guillotine...former A-Rank adventurer who had to disappear from public view for assassinating a noble. People say he could've become an S-rank adventurer. Even if this Rosemonde

chick comes, she won't stand a chance."

– 2 –

PHILIA

HIDDEN BEHIND THE CITY of Ploroque was the black quarter. Deep within that area was a building that served as a base of operations for the Bloodied Coin. Threats, abductions, obstruction, and whatever else needed doing: the Bloodied Coin was for hire.

Mardas was a large man with auburn hair, a massive sword, and a flashy fighting style. That relentless energy earned him the nickname, "the Laughing Guillotine." He'd accepted assassination jobs and the like from people of authority during his adventuring days...but then his actions were revealed, and he was forced to flee. That was how he came to be here in the black quarter and the head of a criminal organization.

...And now the Bloodied Coin was destroyed.

Huge claw marks gouged the walls and floor of their hideout, like a massive beast had torn it apart. Members of the group lay here and there on the ground, bruised and battered.

Mardas was on his knees, dumbstruck. "What...what happened...? Why...? How could the Bloodied Coin...? How could I...? We lost to a single brat...?"

Philia had been taken all the way to the Bloodied Coin's base before she realized she'd been duped. Then she decided to leave...by force.

The group's soldiers tried to stop her, but they never stood a chance against the 3,000-level tyke. Eventually, Mardas came out and got involved.

His first move was to insult his underlings lying prone on the floor. Then he walked up to Philia, which is when she made a massive dragon arm and destroyed the hideout around her.

The man and woman who kidnapped Philia were clinging to each other in a corner of the destroyed base, shaking violently.

“Wh-what did we do...?”

“I didn’t hear anything about this! I didn’t know anything about this!”

Philia glanced in their direction, and they both jumped at the same time.

“You don’t actually know where Kanata is? Then Philia’s going,” Philia said to Mardas. She turned away from him.

Mardas clenched his jaw and squeezed the hilt of his massive sword.

Yes, he would concede that this little girl used some mysterious magic to push the Bloodied Coin to the brink of destruction in the blink of an eye, but she was obviously open to an attack. If word got out his organization had been wrecked by a little girl, it would truly be the end of the Bloodied Coin. His underlings would leave, and the important figures at Grede & Co. who protected him from behind the curtains would cut off ties. Mardas’s life would be on the line.

Most importantly though, Mardas’s pride demanded that Philia must not leave alive.

“You won’t get away with this, you cocky little pip-squeak!” he cried, leaping from the floor and flying toward Philia. He raised his massive sword, ready to strike. Wantz’s request was to kidnap the girl, but Mardas was swinging to kill. He knew better than to pull his punches against this enemy, even if she was a small child. “Learn why I’m called the Guillotine!”

Mardas’s blade came down on Philia’s neck from behind, her defenses entirely open.

Or it should have. Philia turned around at the last moment and used her bare hand to grab the tip of the giant sword.

“H-how...? That’s impossible... I don’t care how powerful you are...” he babbled.

It felt completely different from attacking a human. If he had to make a comparison, it was like he’d tried to strike a lump of adamantite. Mardas could already tell this girl had some mysterious power, but now he realized the person he just attacked was truly beyond his comprehension.

Philia tossed the sword behind her, easily ripping it from Mardas’s hands. It

flew straight into the wall in the distance where it flew apart with a loud rumble and a puff of dust.

Mardas's facial muscles stiffened as he watched the wall crumble.

"Do you still need Philia for something?" asked Philia, backlit by the light spilling in from the broken wall behind her. The overwhelming power she displayed and the divine lighting from the sun hitting her back made her appear like some terrifying elder god.

"N-no. Nothing..." said Mardas, barely managing to whimper the words. Then he crumpled to the ground, unable to bear it anymore. "I...I had no idea! My God! Please forgive me!"

He pressed his forehead to the ground and groveled.

"God...?" Philia's eyes narrowed as she looked down at Mardas.

"Y-yes! This is the first time I've ever seen something so powerful! From the moment I was born, I've been an unbelieving fool! But now I understand that a god exists! I repent! Please forgive me!"

A massive dragon's arm instantly appeared and smashed the ground right next to Mardas. Its claws raked the ground and sent fissures extending in a band across the area.

"Eek!" Mardas let out a high-pitched squeal and curled into a ball.

"Philia...doesn't really remember when she was called that. But Philia *doesn't* like it," said Philia coldly, then she walked away. There was no one left to bar her exit.

The entire time she was leaving, Mardas remained in his ball, not raising his head.

There were two people heading toward the Bloodied Coin's base around the same time. In the front was a man in a black tailcoat and hat, an elegant outfit uncommon in these backstreets.

It was Grede, the ruler of Ploroque.

“I would have gladly taken on the responsibility of contacting the dark group... You really shouldn’t be out, Lord Grede. And should you not have changed first?” The man speaking was Gain, one of Grede’s subordinates.

“Gain, I’m going out for a little walk in my garden. Why would I need to hide myself?” said Grede.

“It appears quite a number of the royal knights have come into the city. They’re not just watching—I imagine they intend to arrest you directly, my lord. If something goes wrong while you’re out and you bump into them, it might hinder the plan...”

“Ha ha, I never once feared the royal knights. Those measly squires are simple window dressing. There is only one troublesome individual that concerns me.”

“Meaning...?”

“That girl in the artificer’s shop. I was having fun goading Wantz about her, but I’ve heard some rumors. I find them hard to believe, but best to check if they’re true. It seems Wantz is planning to use the Bloodied Coin as a weapon, so I would like to ask them in person before—”

Grede suddenly stopped walking. Gain followed the direction he was looking in and saw...a little girl with pale pink and lime green hair walking down the street.

“She looks exactly like the child acquaintance of the artificer. Why is she here alone in the black quarter?” asked Gain, but Grede ignored him.

Grede walked up to the odd-looking girl and said, “My dear, what are you doing in a place like this? Hm? It's dangerous. A little lady like you shouldn’t be walking about here alone.”

Grede’s eyes crinkled as the corners of his mouth pulled up into an oppressively large smile, his voice sugary-sweet.

“L-Lord Grede...?” said Gain, sounding confused.

“**S**-SCARY STRANGERS took Philia away...now Philia’s going back to where Pomera is,” explained Philia.

“Oh, is that so? You did a good job escaping. You must have been so scared,” Grede wheedled on in his sweet tone.

Gain watched their conversation with trepidation. He’d worked beside Grede for a long time and had never once seen him act so disgracefully. What in the world was making him stoop to this?

Grede was a shrewd, unfathomable man who could never be pinned down. Ever aloof, it seemed as if he could track the course of the world around him. Like he could peer into the minds of others. There was clearly something abnormal about him interacting with some unfamiliar child.

“Ho ho, so you’re Philia, are you?” said Grede. “Hm, hm, hm, what should we do? Some scallywags might attack you again, and it’s not safe out here. Even if it were, a sweet child like you shouldn’t be walking around on her own. You must be tired after all those scary adventures. Why don’t you come visit my mansion? You can rest there while you tell me what happened. I also have a lot of tasty treats. What do you say?”

“But it’s n-not good to go with strangers,” said Philia. “It’s dangerous...and bad things happened last time.”

“Oho! What a clever little girl! Well, my name is Grede. Everybody in the city knows me. See, now we’re not strangers.”

“H-hmm...that’s not really what *strangers* means... Besides, Pomera will be worried...”

When Grede heard that, he twirled to face Gain and said, “Gain, go immediately to that item shop and tell them Philia has gone to my mansion to play and she’ll probably be back in the evening. They have my word on this.”

“Wh-what?! Wh-why?” cried Gain. “Wh-why did we come here in the first place, my lord?! I thought this was a simple information-gathering jaunt before we implement the plan! And you said it was important you had to go yourself! Why would you suddenly change your plans?! Most importantly, I cannot leave

you alone without a guard in the black quarter!”

“Did you not hear what I said? I don’t pay you to think, just to do as I say. You’ve been useful to me so far because you never question orders—something I have told you before,” said Grede with a scowl of displeasure.

“Ah...agh...but...this...”

“Ha. Don’t you dare say a single thing about my decisions. You lack my foresight, Gain. I’m not asking for advice from someone as mediocre as you.”

“Ah... Yes, my lord. My apologies. I’ll deliver the message immediately.” Gain didn’t seem entirely convinced, but he did dash off.

“Now, there shouldn’t be any problem. Right, Miss?” said Grede to Philia.

“But—”

“I went to the trouble of sending my attendant, and you’re still not happy?”

“It’s just...well...”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound pushy. It’s just, I’m a very, very important man in this city. And this city is *quite* complicated. I think it might be hard for your friends’ shop to do well here. But if I put in a few good words, they won’t have anything to worry about. That would make this Pomera you mentioned very happy, wouldn’t it? How about it? Just come spend a little time with me. I’m lonely, you see, and I’d love to spend some time with you. I wouldn’t ever lie to you. Or is the idea of spending time with me that awful to you?”

“You won’t do anything mean to Kanata and the others?” asked Philia timidly as she looked into Grede’s eyes.

“Absolutely not. I promise that no matter who they are, I will never hurt one of your friends—provided that they don’t hurt me.”

“...And you have treats?”

“I have so many! I don’t eat them myself, so I save all my yummy things to give to my guests. And it doesn’t matter how hard to get something is—I can use my name to have someone deliver it to us immediately. You can take a whole load of them back with you too!”

“Well, then maybe Philia can go for a little bit.”

“Oh, yes, that would be wonderful,” said Grede happily. His eerie smile stayed fixed in place. “Now, come with me. Let me know if your feet get tired. I’ll give you a piggyback ride.”

– 4 –

PHILIA

A LAVISH CHANDELIER hung from the ceiling, and the walls were decorated with large paintings. The spacious, reddish-brown table was inlaid with gold and embedded diamonds.

“Wow, it’s like a room for a king!” cried Philia when she saw the room’s interior.

“Ha ha! I’m glad you like it.”

The only people seated in the chairs were Grede and Philia, while three of Grede’s subordinates stood in a row by the door, where they were grimacing and shooting each other looks. None of them understood why their lord had suddenly brought this unknown child into the mansion.

“Who’s the girl in the picture?” asked Philia, pointing to a painting showing a little girl. She looked to be around the same age as Philia and sat on a tree-branch swing amid a field of flowers.

“I had a famous traveling artist paint this for me. Ha ha, I liked it so much, I paid ten times the agreed-upon price.”

Grede’s subordinates watched the two talking with questioning expressions. They’d never paid much attention to Grede’s taste in art, but this seemed significant in light of the fact he suddenly invited Philia here as a guest.

“Is she your daughter?” asked Philia.

“No, I’m not married.”

“So, it’s not based on anyone?”

“It’s based on...a friend of mine. But she’s only in my memory now. I was very detailed when I ordered the painting, but I didn’t have any model to show him.”

“Lord Grede... The *plan* is due to go into effect any minute. Why are you doing this now?” asked one of the attendants plaintively, but the glare Grede shot back silenced them.

“Hey, Mister!” said Philia. “Where’s the treats? Philia wants to eat some!” She had been wary when she first met him, but his attitude toward her made her lower her guard, and the decorations in the mansion had swept the rest of her doubts away. Her caution was completely gone.

“You must not be rude like that to Lord Grede, child!” shouted one of the subordinates.

“Be quiet!” roared Grede. “And who do you think *you* are, being rude to my personal guest?!” He slammed the table with his fist and stood forcefully.

“M-m-my apologies, my lord!”

“Hmm? You think apologizing and lowering your head will get you out of this? You don’t seem to understand anything. I don’t need someone this incompetent in my employ. As of this moment, you’re—”

“Um, Mister, Philia’s not upset. Okay?” said Philia.

“If you say so, my dear. I’m sorry, you were kind enough to come here, and I’ve made you uncomfortable.” Grede’s expression changed to a smile as he looked at Philia, but he immediately shot a cold glare toward his subordinates. “Well, then? Where’s the warm chocolate milk and sweets?”

“They, uh, must be a bit behind schedule. I’ll go check on the status.” One of the attendants immediately left the room.

Soon, treats of all types were brought into the room and arranged atop the table. There were cookies with pictures drawn on them in chocolate, pudding with fruit compote, even an elaborately decorated cake. The sumptuous desserts buried the table in a blink of the eye.

“Oh... Wow!” cried Philia.

“Ha ha, I don’t think you’ll finish all of this! But take some little by little,

whatever you like.”

“Philia’ll eat it all! Just you see!”

“Ah, that’s reassuring. I’ve never eaten sweets before, but perhaps I’ll try a little taste today.”

The subordinates returned to their line and watched Grede coolly.

The culmination of years of planning was about to go into effect, and the timing had to be carefully adjusted depending on the situation. That meant this moment was supposed to be of the utmost importance to Grede. It was no time to bring in a child as a guest.

“These little soldier cookies are so cute!” Philia squirmed in delight as she picked up a cookie with a soldier drawn on it.

“You think so? I’m glad you find them so agreeable. I’ll have to thank the person who made them again.”



“Philia thought you were a scary person... It’s good you’re so nice! This is so, so much fun—”

Just then, the door burst open, and a panicked subordinate rushed in. “L-Lord Grede, disaster has struck!”

“Ah!” Philia was so surprised that she dropped the soldier cookie onto her plate. Its head broke off, and Philia looked at the two pieces with tears welling in her eyes. “Mister Soldier-Man...”

“You...” said Grede casting a withering glare toward the newcomer. “I am entertaining a guest. Could you at least knock first? Or are you *trying* to embarrass me?”

“That’s not important now!” said the subordinate. “Twenty royal knights have formed a wall in front of the mansion! Each one is of a high level! They’re saying they’ve come to take you to the High Court in the capital on suspicion of planning to incite civil war! They’ve likely moved on the black quarter at the same time!”

“Oh? They’ve moved much quicker than I expected,” said Grede, his smile returning. “Maybe someone betrayed me...or the royal family has some unusual power I’m unaware of.”

“D-did something happen...?” asked Philia.

“Oh, it’s nothing to worry about, my dear,” he said, then turned back to his subordinate. “Initiate the plan on your own... Deal with these uninvited guests who came all the way from the capital. *They* should be powerful enough.”

“On our...own?”

“Mm-hmm, that lot is nothing to be afraid of and I’m busy entertaining this girl. Once you do that...make yourself scarce for a bit. I don’t want you dampening our fun time with unimportant matters.”

“...U-understood, my lord,” said the man, and all of Grede’s subordinates left.

“What’s starting...? Are you doing something bad?” asked Philia.

“Ha ha ha, it’s nothing serious. Just a big fuss.”

“U-umm... Philia’s going home, even though you made all these nice things to eat. Sorry. Philia needs to make sure Pomera and the others are okay,” said Philia hesitantly as she stood up.

“Hm, it seems you are far more clever than your appearance would imply.” Grede’s smile faded, and he stared at Philia through narrowed eyes. “Seeing as man-made homunculi are entirely removed from the growth patterns which naturally occurring organisms undergo in nature, they can have discrepancies between their body, mentality, and intelligence.”

Philia balled her hands up and assumed a fighting stance as Grede spoke. She faced him directly.

– 5 –

PHILIA

VERY SHORTLY in Ploroque, the golems I created in secret will attack the royal knights,” said Grede. “Then, I will use military force to take absolute control of the city and declare Ploroque’s independence from the kingdom, as well as war on it.”

Philia’s eyes opened wide. “R-really? You’re going to do that...?” she asked in disbelief.

“I am.” Grede’s tone was emotionless. “Ploroque has been developing magic weapons and making advances in dark magic research. I wanted to initiate this plan when I controlled the economy of the entire kingdom...but the royal knights acted faster than anticipated. No matter, my allies are nothing more than decorations. What’s most needed to overturn the country is overwhelming *individual* might. Quality over quantity. I came to that conclusion decades ago. My golem squad can overpower even the Hundred Monsters Knights and S-rank adventurers.

“And there’s no need for me to be there personally,” he continued. “While I have no intentions of doing anything to you, my dear, I wouldn’t recommend leaving just now. You’ll be safest in my mansion, rather than in a city which is

about to break out into war.”

Philia shook her head. “Philia’s not staying. She’s going to go help Pomera and the others. And if you’re a bad man...Philia won’t ever forgive you.”

“You aren’t bluffing, are you? You really did escape from the Bloodied Coin, meaning you’re capable of fighting. And you have a strong sense of justice! Such a good girl. Were you made that way?”

“That doesn’t matter! Kanata and the others care about Philia, so Philia cares about them! They’re her friends!”

“And so brave. Don’t you think they may be using you? Humans are only motivated by greed. I know because of who I am. There are reasons why homunculi are forbidden in kingdom law. People went through experiment after experiment to manufacture a distorted life, all in the name of having a pet to trail after them. And you think they’re friends? Ha.”

“St-stop saying homunculi! Philia doesn’t like being called that. And they didn’t make Philia!”

“If you tell me not to attack them, I won’t lay a hand on them. But it would be best for you if you don’t see this Kanata and whoever again. Normal humans can never understand what it’s like to be a homunculus.”

“What do you know anyway?!”

“What do I know? Ha ha ha! I know plenty! I’ve seen humans’ most disgusting traits on full display in this hedonistic city.”

Explosions and screams could be heard coming from outside. Philia frowned and looked toward the window. Just as Grede said, fighting was breaking out between knights and golems.

“Don’t worry,” said Grede. “The knights here now are no Hundred Monsters Knights, they’re just your average soldiers. There’s not much fun in killing them, so I’ll flex my power by making them flee and report back. The entire kingdom will fall into chaos, reducing their will to fight. I won’t kill the residents of Ploroque either, as long as they don’t resist. Well...not yet, anyway.”

“But *why*? You have lots of money, you live in this castle house, lots of people

listen to you, you can eat yummy food...and you're still not happy?" asked Philia. "Stop! You're not a bad man. Philia can tell that much. You just seem... lonely."

"An innocent girl like you wouldn't understand. If everyone was satisfied with an average amount of happiness, we would have no conflict, no discrepancy between rich and poor...and no growth. Humanity's history is filled with insatiable greed and it is the *true* nature of humans." Grede spread his arms wide. "But...this is my own sort of revenge on this world. I have no intention of stopping, so long as I live. No matter what happens."

"How about this: Philia will stay with you forever, so you're not lonely. Is that not good enough?"

Grede's eyes opened wide, then he chuckled quietly. "You really are so pure... Will you listen to an old man's story?"

"A story...?"

"As long as you're in here with me, my subordinates will be unable to fight effectively since they lack their leader. They'll be unable to use the golems effectively, and so the royal knights will quickly defeat them, bringing an end to the situation."

Philia stared at Grede's face. She had no idea what he was up to, but it was clear from his expression that he was trying to tell her something very important to him.

"Okay, fine." Philia gave a small nod.

Grede waited a moment, then began the story. "...A man was born in a poor village. The severe hunger was endless and many died of starvation. Others died in fights or accidents that the hunger caused. Before long, the man's parents and siblings were all dead. He was alone. But then someone claiming to be a sage appeared in the village. The man begged the sage every day until the sage agreed to teach him, and the man gained much knowledge. He then fled that accursed village. He started working as a peddler in dangerous areas that other normal people refused to work in."

"...Is this story about you?"

Could the poor peddler be Grede himself? Grede didn't answer her question. He continued to tell the life story of the peddler as if he were an outside observer.

"His work was dangerous, but he steadily built up his wealth, knowledge, and experience," he continued. "As he did that, he started to memorize which routes others thought were dangerous but really weren't...and which ones were profitable but unknown to other merchants. He had a realization: it was knowledge that saved him. The people back in his village couldn't do anything as they were still suffering through their starvation. The man learned that gaining knowledge and outwitting others was the true key to success."

Grede stood from his chair and walked around the parlor.

"Perhaps it was his ability to act without concern for anyone...his cruelty. It was as if he never thought of others, and that became his weapon as he earned success after success. Or perhaps fate was on his side. He discovered the hidden riches of Ploroque, a city left entirely untouched by all those sharp-eyed merchants despite its perfect location for trade. The man delivered such incredible successes from that land that the kingdom eventually acknowledged him as its lord. In the end, he became known as the Lord of Merchants."

Grede paced as he spoke. Philia remained silent, listening to his story.

"However, the man was unsatisfied. His greed was fathomless. He could never be content with the small successes of a jumped-up peddler. He needed to control the kingdom itself. He carefully built up an area of crime—the black quarter—to act as a smoke screen... Then he began pouring money and resources into it to create weapons that could stand against the kingdom. His arsenal included simple weapons but also black magic, forbidden golems, and chimeras, creatures formed from merging monsters."

Grede stopped in front of the painting, then turned back to Philia. His lips formed a self-deprecating smile.

"...And he researched homunculi. But he would come to regret that with all his heart."

Chapter 4:

Chaos and Black Reapers in the Merchant City

– 1 –

I HURRIED BACK to The Pixie's Wingbeats only to find a "Closed" sign on the door.

We didn't have anybody else to take care of the shop, but maybe it was too much to ask Pomera to handle it alone. Philia was in the shop too, but she wasn't really qualified to help out.

I had gone with Mel and Rosemonde to meet with influential merchants in Ploroque on Isabella's introduction. The only person that really needed to be there was Mel. Rosemonde could support her on her own, so I decided to head back.

Isabella insisted we should try to avoid closing the shop today even though we were uneasy about the small number of products we had available, so Pomera was left as its lone clerk. It looked like she'd reached her limit.

"Pomera-san...are you okay?" I called once I opened the door, but there was no answer.

I scanned the shop but didn't see her. I went into the back and found her toiling away over a stack of papers.

"Oh, Kanata! You're finally back..." she said with a heavy sigh of relief.

"Wh-what's with all that paperwork?" I asked.

"They're contracts and applications that Isabella brought. She said we should send them back as soon as possible... Since I can't do anything without Mel, I thought I would at least read them over, so I could explain them to her."

"Oh...so that's why the shop's closed."

"Partly. I just couldn't handle it alone. It was so much: products kept running

out, then there was the never-ending line of customers, sorting out the inventory, all the questions I couldn't answer, and all the pushy merchants who kept insisting we make some sort of contract. So, I shut down to do paperwork... S-sorry," she said weakly.

"D-don't be. You worked really hard. We already knew we didn't have enough people, so it might have been better to stay closed from the beginning..." I smiled uncomfortably and looked around the shop. "Where's Philia-chan?"

"Well... I took my eyes off her."

"Took your eyes off her...?" I echoed, and Pomera nodded.

"Philia went walking around outside the shop at some point...and apparently got lost."

Philia just decided to leave the shop? She was still a precocious little girl, but she wouldn't do something like that without talking to someone. But after The Pixie's Wingbeats got really busy, we'd been so busy with contracts, sales, working the shop, and refining the products that we hadn't had a chance to spend time with her. Maybe she was lonely.

"She went outside and got lost..." I said. "Sorry, I don't really understand what's going on. How'd you figure that out?"

"Oh, well, it sounds like some kind person is already looking after her. He saw Philia walking around near the black quarter, approached her because it seemed unsafe, and then let her rest at his home... A messenger-sort-of person working for him came and told me that."

"Oh...so she's not lost." I let out a sigh of relief. But if Philia was already in someone's care, there shouldn't be a problem anymore, right? I couldn't tell what Pomera was so worried about.

"I tried to go pick up Philia right away," explained Pomera, "But the messenger told me the man wanted me to wait here, since we might end up just missing each other if I left. I also had to watch the shop, so I agreed and decided to wait. But...that was nearly an hour ago."

The request to wait seemed reasonable, since the other person might come by with Philia while she was out.

“There’s two of us now that I’m back, so there’s no risk of a mix-up,” I said. “We can’t cause trouble for this person for too long by making them take care of Philia. And...Philia doesn’t always know how to control her strength. I’ll go pick her up. Do you know where this person’s house is...?”

“Well...that’s actually the complicated part. The messenger left this.” Pomera handed me a card.

I thought it was some sort of business card, but it was oddly thick...and gilded. I had a bad feeling. “Grede & Co., President Grede...” I read aloud then looked up, my eyes meeting Pomera’s. “Isn’t he...?”

...Our enemy. Apparently the reason Wantz saw Mel as a real enemy was because Grede didn’t like unexpectedly powerful merchants popping up in his city.

And Isabella said she was actually standing against Grede. With him being so invested in his magic research that he rarely interacted with the company, Isabella had turned her back on him and secretly increased her influence from within. She probably wasn’t planning on forcing Grede to step down just yet... but her betrayal was in motion already.

What happened to Philia? And what was Grede up to? Was this part of some scheme?

Isabella said he was old and weak, but he was still the man who became a merchant lord in a single lifetime. Both Isabella and I probably underestimated him.

“What should we do, Kanata?” asked Pomera. “I was afraid to make a move because of that.”

We couldn’t leave Philia there. Maybe we should consult with Isabella before going to Grede? No, she wasn’t the kind of person you could easily get a meeting with. My best course of action right now was to head to his mansion and find out what his plans were.

“I’ll go meet with Grede. Pomera-san, you wait for Mel-san and Rosemonde-san to get back. Try to pump Isabella for advice if you get the chance.”

I HEADED TOWARD Grede's mansion to get Philia back, but the situation in the city was strange. I heard screams. Just as I was starting to feel suspicious, I saw smoke from an explosion rising in the distance. Whatever was going on was serious.

"That's the center of town. Is something happening at Grede's mansion?"

My first thought was Philia. I wouldn't be surprised at all if some of Grede's subordinates threatened her, and then she overreacted and flattened the mansion. That would spell disaster.

"Aah, aah! I-I had no idea! I didn't know anything about this!" cried a man as he came running away from the commotion in the other direction.

I recognized him. It was Wantz, Mel's archnemesis. His normally neat clothes and hair were tousled and messy from his rush.

"Y-you're in the way! Move!" he shouted as he reached out to push me aside.

I swiftly dodged and circled around his back. "I'm sorry, but I want to ask you something," I said as I twisted his arm back and forced him down. His chin bashed into the ground.

"What?! Agh!!"

"What's going on?" I asked. "You're running around alone without a guard."

"I-is this how you ask people questions?! Y-you... You're that guy working with *her*! Mel!"

"You didn't leave me many options."

"Take your hands off me! Let me go! W-was this all a setup to capture me?! I never knew about this... I had no idea!" He seemed confused.

"I'm asking you what's going on, that's all. I'll let you go as soon as that's done."

"Th-the royal knight moved to attack Lord Grede...but the moment I realized

that was happening, hordes of golems swarmed from the center of the city and the black quarter. Th-they're attacking the knights and the surrounding areas!" babbled Wantz quickly.

"Grede's attacking the royal knights...?" Isabella did say the royal knights had noticed Grede's black magic research and were probably going to arrest him soon. It sounded like Grede got the jump on them first. I gulped. "He's picking a fight with the kingdom...? That's insane."

"That's why I'm running away! I might end up squished by a golem, and the royal knights think I'm in on this with Lord Grede! It'd be one thing if they were to take me in for questioning...but it's equally likely that they'll cut me down on the spot! I knew Lord Grede was going senile and doing dubious things, but I never even imagined he'd cook up something as big as this! I swear I didn't know anything about it!" yelled Wantz in a strangled cry.

He curled up on the ground and started bawling. Between sobs, I heard him say, "And if I leave Ploroque, I'll end up attacked by bandits or monsters as I wander about between cities! Robbers have this area marked out, since there are so many peddlers and wealthy people! With the black quarter, this place isn't safe even if it were to prosper! And I'm in no place to ask the people in the black quarter to protect me—I can't tell friend from foe right now! I don't even have the money to pay for hired hands. *And* the golems are coming out of the black quarter!"

Wantz pounded the ground with his fist.

"Uh, I wasn't really asking about that. I meant—"

"And there's no point in trying to join a caravan, not when the rest of the people will see me as one of Lord Grede's goons! Oh, Lord Grede, why didn't you tell me anything?! If I'd known you were planning something this dangerous, I would have liquidated all my assets and fled in the night! Then I'd have sold you out to the royal knights!"

"...Maybe he knew you'd do that?"

"Don't drag young people with a bright future into the reckless ambitions of a senile old man! And Jude ran off on his own! ...What do I do?!" Wantz gripped my shoulders tightly.

“L-let go! That’s enough! I get the picture! You can run off wherever you want to!” I said.

I had a basic understanding of the situation now. Grede was attacking the royal knights in a bid to cement his complete control over the city. Maybe he was trying to take over the whole kingdom.

“Run off?!” said Wantz. “Where would I go?! There’s no sanctuary for me! Oh, I should never have played money games with that stupid girl! I thought it was weird that Lord Grede had completely stepped back from the merchant business! Ah ha ha ha! Even that tricky Isabella misjudged the situation! Some ‘Playwright’ she is!”

“...What is *with* you?” Maybe he was so backed into a corner that he was losing it.

Anyway, Wantz wasn’t my highest priority right now. Out of all the times this could happen, Grede chose when Philia was in his mansion to start this mess. Or maybe getting Philia triggered this? Either way, I was worried about her.

Grede was the lord of this city and had connections to its criminal underbelly. He only decided to act now because he saw a chance of winning.

“...Thank you for the information,” I said and moved away from Wantz toward Grede’s mansion again.

“But what do I do?!” shouted Wantz. “I threw away my personal time and my good name! I spent my whole life building my status in Ploroque! Now it’s ruined, all the way down to the foundation... What do I do? What do I dooo?! There’s nothing left! Aaagh!”

Wantz’s wails echoed behind me. I turned back. “If you regret what you’ve done, do your best to survive now and restart how you live later. Screaming about it now won’t help.”

“Change how I live...?”

I set off without a second glance. I didn’t have the time to look after someone like him.

I LOOKED DOWN at the area around Grede's mansion from the rooftops.

"This is bad..."

Several dozen golems were decimating the royal knights. The knights were fighting back, but they weren't making a dent on the golems' bodies. Meanwhile, the golems' massive metal arms swept the knights from the cobblestones as their agonized cries rang across the rooftops.

"It's not good, even if we keep fighting!"

"We weren't told anything about this! I'm ready to give my life for the kingdom, but I don't want to die a pointless death!"

"We can at least buy time for the residents to flee!"

Some of the knights were running. All signs pointed to a loss for them. I could tell from their expressions that even the ones still fighting had given up hope.

I checked the golems' levels and gasped.

Race: Mithril Golem

Lv: 100

HP: 598/650

MP: 388/400

Their levels were much higher than I had expected. These were not enemies a squad of royal knights could handle. An A-rank adventurer could just about handle *one*. An S-rank might handle a couple. But this many? Forget about it.

"How'd it get this bad...?"

It wasn't natural for Grede to have a seemingly limitless supply of warriors on par with an A-Rank adventurer. Powerful individuals sometimes appeared in

Locklore, pushing it to the brink of destruction—higher beings like Naiarotop manipulated the world to keep it in that state. I knew that. But if someone in a position of authority could easily mass produce golems like this, not even Naiarotop would be able to best them. This was enough military power to conquer Locklore several times over.

Or was Naiarotop behind this, with me as the target again?

“U-urgh... It’s over... How did a merchant lord get golems like this?” said one of the knights, a man with a bobbed haircut.

Hang on. I knew that guy. We worked together during the Red Staff of Authority incident. His name was Bennet.

“Groaaah!” One of the mithril golems attacked Bennet.

“Eeek! D-Daddy!” Bennet crawled across the ground, trying to escape.

I leapt from the rooftop and came to a sliding stop in front of him, where I countered the golem’s arm and forced it away with my blade.

“Graargh!”

I kicked the golem in its stomach. A fissure ran through its body, then it crumbled to pieces.

“Wh-what the hell?” a knight shouted. “Is that an adventurer?”

The knights started chattering.

“K-Kanata!” said Bennet. His face beamed brightly as he crawled to my feet and clung on to me. “You came to save me in my moment of peril!”

“Uh, no, that’s not really why I’m—”

“Everyone, don’t give up! Kanata here is a future S-rank adventurer and a former fighting companion of mine. In fact, he’s my good friend!” Bennet rallied the other knights.

“Did you say we’ve got an S-rank adventurer as backup?!” another cried out. “Then there is still hope!”

“Uh, we’re not really friends, Ben—” I started.

“K-Kanata, two are coming up behind you!” Bennet’s face blanched, and he

pointed his sword behind me.

I twirled, slashing into both golems as I did. Their upper halves leapt into the air, then crashed back into the ground, scoring deep gouges where they fell.

“...I know you’re above average, Kanata, but you just cut them down like they were slimes. How high is your level?” Bennet gently prodded the broken bottom half of one of the golems with his sword.

I wanted to hurry up and look for Philia, but I couldn’t leave things in this state. “There’s a lot of them. Let’s wrap this up quickly,” I said. I lowered my sword and glared at the horde of golems.

They all stopped and turned toward me. They seemed to realize they couldn’t handle me unless they took me on as a group.

“The rest of the knights should go handle the golems that went further off, or guide the citizens’ evacuation,” I said. “I’ll take care of this.”

“B-but I can’t leave this many opponents to a single adventurer! It mars my status as a royal knight!” said one injured knight. They hauled their bloodstained body upright and readied their sword.

“It’s fine, just go!” shouted Bennet. “You’ll only hold us back in your condition! Honor is important to knights, but we mustn’t cling to an ideal for the sake of it. Don’t forget: a knight’s real duty is not to attack, but to protect! That’s what my dad says!” He raised his sword. “Leave this to me and Kanata!”

“You, er, don’t really have to stay,” I said.

“Shoulder to shoulder, Kanata! Let’s go!”

“F-fine.”

I didn’t feel entirely convinced, but I held my sword to the sky once more. The two of us rushed toward the horde of golems.

“O_{OO}RGH!”

My sword cut into another golem. I'd lost count of how many, but the area around me had turned into a mountain of mithril remains.

“He sure stocked up on a ton of this rare metal,” I muttered. If looters filled up a pushcart with this and ran, they'd be living the good life for the next ten years.

With that, the golems near Grede's mansion were essentially taken care of. There was only one left.

“Groooh!”

Bennet rushed around the golem, slashing out at his massive opponent using his sword. There was a loud clang each time, but he was only making tiny dents in the surface. It didn't look like he was causing any real damage, until his sword cracked and half the blade broke off.

“Curses. A bludgeoning weapon would be better for this,” he said.

“Groooh!” The golem brandished its arms.

“Eeek!”

I leapt in front of the golem and struck it in its belly with a kick. It sailed backward for some distance, then crashed into the ground and rolled until it struck a wall. It stopped there, unmoving. I checked its status and confirmed it was out of commission.

“All done, Bennet-san,” I said.

“Uh...right. I expected nothing less, Kanata.” Bennet stared intently at my shoes, then tossed his broken sword to the ground.

“What's going on here?” I asked.

“Lord Grede was planning a revolt. There were always dark rumors about him, saying he had connections with criminal organizations or was conducting forbidden research... But the kingdom couldn't do anything because he was too influential. Then we got a solid tip off from a merchant formerly in Grede & Co. that he was creating golems and would use force to gain Ploroque's

independence. So we finally acted.”

“A tip off?” Something about that tugged at my mind.

I thought Grede had only been working with people he absolutely needed and could trust. But his valued lackey, Wantz, didn’t know about this plan. Even Isabella, the skilled merchant and the rumored number two in the company, only knew Grede was getting old and involved in strange things. She said Grede was senile and heading toward his own destruction, but I assumed *he* wanted her to think that.

He completely hid his plan, advancing it in the shadows. And he’d made a fighting force capable of rivaling the entire kingdom without anyone realizing it. But if what Bennet said was true, Grede was betrayed by someone he trusted. *Someone* knew the entire plan.

“Thinking about it now won’t accomplish anything,” I said. I didn’t know much about Grede anyway.

“We saw Grede as a threat, but I’m surprised he managed to build enough power to easily push us aside. Ha ha, but his time is up! His luck ran out the moment he missed our secret weapon...Kanata!” Bennet’s breathing was ragged, but he glared at Grede’s mansion with a grin on his face.

“I’m not your secret weap—”

“Off we go, Kanata. There’s nothing else protecting Grede. That old man has gone mad and needs to be put down. Let’s go give him his last goodbye.” Bennet pointed toward Grede’s mansion with excitement.

“About that... He does have something else, I think.”

“What?”

“Grede should know there’s no point in getting some level 100 golems to take on the kingdom. Even if he knocked back the royal knights here, he’d still lose at some point down the line.”

Enemies of this caliber could be taken down if you just brought together a few S-Rank adventurers from Manaloch like Aries’s Hand, also known as Kotone.

“W-well! I, er, suppose. Maybe,” stammered Bennet.

“Based on past examples, we know the kingdom can get together several people who are close to level 200, like they do for defeating demon kings. Against a golem horde like this...yeah, it might be a tough fight. But the kingdom could take it down if they put their minds to it.”

This was a poor substitute for an army if Grede had his heart set on taking on the kingdom. The criminal organizations Grede kept in the black quarter would add to his followers, but I didn't think that was enough to persuade a guy like Grede that his victory was assured. There was a small chance the knights acted so much more quickly than he expected that he wasn't able to prepare...but I shouldn't act on that assumption.

There was a chance Naiarotop was involved too.

“The fight might get even harsher from here on out. Do you really want to come with me?” I said. “Depending on the scale of things, it'll be impossible to protect you while I fight.”

Bennet was silent for a while, then cleared his throat and said, “Kanata...you have your battles, and I have mine. I'm sure someday you'll be the kind of hero whose name goes down in history. And I live just to protect the people suffering in front of me—that is a royal knight's battle. Not a Hundred Monsters Knight, just your average everyday knight. Go.”

“Oh. Okay.” I gave Bennet a small nod, then went toward Grede's mansion.

He took the easy way out, but Bennet was Bennet. He hadn't stopped risking his life in the fight for justice.

I couldn't stand by quietly and let this all play out. Philia needed rescuing too. And...I felt guilty for leaving her alone earlier today. And if Naiarotop was involved with this, that was the same as saying this entire mess was caused because I was here. Those gods kept on disturbing the peace of this world for their own entertainment. And to me, that was unforgivable.

“Kanata... Let's both get out of this alive and meet again someday! Make sure of it!” shouted Bennet.

“Sure.”

What a positive attitude.

LOVIS

SOME PEOPLE had already infiltrated Grede's mansion by the time Kanata was on his way.

"Clod Missile!"

Damia cast a spell, launching a dirt explosive toward a golem. The golem blocked it with its arms, but the explosion obscured its view. Yozakura used that opening to close in, her katana in hand. She slashed through the golem, and the fragments of its massive body clattered to the floor.

The woman confirmed the golem was dead, then returned her katana to its sheath.

"Hm, all right. These are a little too nice to be some merchant's playthings. Lovis's judgment was correct," she muttered, like it was nothing.

"Ha ha, I'll be upset if these measly golems are all he's got. A person of power uses their most trusted weapon as a shield for themselves. Let's hurry to this Lord of Merchants or whatever he's called," said Lovis as he ran his tongue over his lips. The remains of five mithril golems littered the ground around him.

"Ah, impossible! This can't be happening! How could those three so easily defeat Lord Grede's golems?!"

"No! Lovis of the Black Reapers is supposed to be dead! Why is he here?!"

Grede's subordinates ran in a panic the moment they saw him.

"Come now, Lord of Merchants...you can at least give me some fun. You did set this overdone stage, after all. And I really doubt you think you can take on the entire kingdom with these worthless dolls. I hope this isn't some boring attempt to buy time while you flee the country." Lovis went to go up the stairs but stopped. "Oh...?"

Yozakura swung her sword, cleanly cleaving the brick flying at Lovis's back in

two. “A surprise attack? How rude.”

“Ah ha ha! Just a little greeting. Should I have said, ‘Hello, what a pleasure to meet you,’ and bowed? Not like I need good manners when dealing with criminals, am I right?” said a black-haired man with blond highlights. There was a dark look in his eye, and one of his canines peeked out from his mouth. He carried a large sword on his back.

“You seem to know who Lovis is. And you like the sound of your own voice, though I find it unpleasant,” said Yozakura, her hand going to the hilt of her katana.

But Lovis stepped in front of her and stopped her. “It’s all right, Yozakura. No need to get angry.”

“Sir! This man is insulting us.”

“What? I thought I was being friendly,” said the man.

“You...” Yozakura started, but she looked at Lovis’s face and couldn’t stop a tremble from running through her body. Lovis stared at the man, a disconcerting smile on his face and a look in his eyes like a snake homing in on its prey.

“That arrogant attitude, those actions, and most of all, that courage! It must keep him from retreating even though he knows who I am. There’s no doubt about it—he’s Mitsuru Ijuuin, S-rank adventurer and traveler from another world. You don’t often come face-to-face with someone as powerful as this. Rumor has it he’s over level 200. If you consider only pureblood humans, he’s likely one of the top five most powerful humans in the world.”

“Th-this guy is Mitsuru Ijuuin?! And we’re running into him in the Lord of Merchant’s mansion?!” cried Damia with a gasp.

“Ha, I’m honored you know of me,” said Mitsuru. “But I’m not planning on getting cozy with some dirty criminals. I was looking for some schmucks to try out what I learned from that intense training with Grandpa Lizard. And look, I found you! I don’t know if you’re working for Grede or if you’re just tourists. I’ll crush you either way.” Mitsuru punched his fist into his open palm.

“Ah, good! Amazing! Mitsuru Ijuuin, you are simply delectable!” Lovis leered

as he brandished his large scythe.

“If that’s what floats your boat,” said Mitsuru. “Guess you’re even more of a pervert than the rumors make you out to be. You’re...level 180 and change, huh? Well, I guess you’re fine as a warmup before I go destroy the Lord of Merchants.”

Lovis closed in on Mitsuru, step by step.

“I—I’ve never seen Lovis like this. His eyes are like a monster’s, cold and cruel... But somehow also innocent and childlike.” Yozakura gasped and watched Lovis from behind as he showed a battle madness like none before.

Damia stared at Lovis’s back. He was spellbound like Yozakura and almost forgot to breathe, but then seemed to remember something. “Ah! Sir!”

“Damia? Yozakura? Don’t interfere,” said Lovis. “I only bring you along with me to be the opening act for times like this. If you get too involved, I’ll cut you down as well. Mitsuru Ijuuin is *my* prey.”

“But the promise you made to the white-haired wom—I mean, the White Goddess!” called Damia.

“Hm?”

“I mean, this is a tricky one! But Mitsuru Ijuuin is clearly a *hero*!”

Hearing that, a voice drifted through Lovis’s battle rage-addled mind.

“If I learn that you have committed evil acts in other places, I will accept my responsibility and find you. Remember this.”

Lovis stopped in his tracks.

“What’s up?” asked Mitsuru, looking puzzled as he brandished his large sword.

“I mean, if you think it’s fine, it’s probably fine. I guess? Maybe,” said Damia.

“This is safe, isn’t it? Just barely?” asked Lovis. He turned to face Damia with reluctance.

“Uhhh, well... It feels sort of borderline to me.”

“B-but he picked a fight with me first!”

“It’s up to you to decide, Boss. W-we’ll stick with you no matter what!”

Lovis didn’t reply.

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LOVIS

“**S**HOULD I FIGHT...or not?” Lovis stood lost in thought, his hand over his mouth.

Mitsuru Ijuuin was one of the most powerful adventurers in this world. Lovis had never had the opportunity to fight someone so strong.

However, while his rude attitude and violent tendencies might have earned him some bad press, Mitsuru was still an S-rank adventurer and considered a hero by the kingdom. Killing him would absolutely incur the wrath of the White Goddess. She was intimidating enough that Lovis believed she would keep her promise no matter what.

Yozakura and Damia watched Lovis’s silence with trepidation.

“I don’t have to do this now,” said Lovis with a hint of reluctance. He lowered his scythe.

“Sir, are you changing your mind?” asked Yozakura, sounding dissatisfied.

Damia hurriedly added, “I-I think it’s a fine decision!”

“Our original goal was Grede,” said Lovis. “And, uh, he shouldn’t care either. Y-you! Mitsuru the traveler! Let it be known that I have disbanded the Black Reapers.

I’m not going to claim something as gauche as I’ve changed the direction of my blade because I’ve changed my ways, but I’m not your enemy today. I’ve turned over a new leaf. If you wish to fight, attack someone else.”

“Ha, lost your nerve now that you’re up against me? And I had my hopes up. Looks like you’re just another boring NPC.” Mitsuru gave an exaggerated shrug. “But, you know, that’s not going to work for me. The Lord of Merchants was *my*

target first. That guy's taking on the kingdom with a bunch of weak toys no stronger than the Magic Dragon Statues. It sounds like Locklorian thugs can't even do basic math. I'm not really sure Grede's worth fighting."

Mitsuru smacked his huge sword against the floor as he challenged Lovis. "So even if you've got no reason to fight me, I have a reason to fight you. I've been waiting for an opponent I can have fun testing my skills on without feeling guilty. So you could at least pretend to give me a decent fight, Baby Reaper. Or we could just play a game of tag with you crawling on the floor trying to escape. It doesn't matter to me."

"Reprobate! How dare you speak like that to Lovis!" said Yozakura. "Sir, do you really intend to just take all this abuse?! I've had enough! Damia and I will handle this! Then, if that white-haired girl comes, I'll commit seppuku to atone! I can't stand this anymore!" She scowled, her hand twitching at the hilt of her katana.

"Oh, nice. You use *iaido* then? Cool. I'm down with cosplay," said Mitsuru.

"What did you just say?!" Yozakura snarled.

"Yozakura, stand down," said Lovis.

"That I will not do, even on your orders, Sir! I can't let the insult stand! How much are you willing to let your blade dull?!"

"That's not what I mean. I'll do it. You stand down." Lovis's lips curled up, and he stepped toward Mitsuru. "Mitsuru Ijuuin, you really are the human I've waited for. I understand you. In fact, *only* I understand you, because of who I am. I understand your thoughts, your desires, your unwavering confidence that lets you look down on others as mediocre...and behind that, an overwhelming emptiness because you cannot find an equal opponent. You thirst for battle and hope that someday you will be destroyed by the blade. I have never met someone so eager to challenge me like this."

Lovis's words hung in the air for a moment before Mitsuru responded, "I have no idea what the hell you're babbling on about. Listen...I like you, but I don't *like-you* like you."

"No, I understand you. You just aren't fully aware of yourself. I've fought

against two travelers, and put both in their graves. But both had massive voids in their hearts. Is it some sort of rule the higher beings have? How could someone as overflowing with confidence and resourcefulness as you feel so utterly lacking? I swear, you and I are alike.”

Lovis hunched over slightly as he spoke, then covered his mouth with his hand to stifle a laugh. Then he lifted his head again, looked at Mitsuru, and said, “And though we may be similar...there is a significant difference between you and me. You feel a vague sense of fulfillment from being seen as a hero.”

“Okay, this is getting gross,” said Mitsuru. “You don’t seem to get it, but there’s like a 50-level difference between us. I’m going to shut your mouth for you.”

“I did say earlier that I’m trying to avoid killing. I don’t know if you’ll bloom or wither in the future, but I do think it would be a shame to pluck you as you are now. I’ll try to let you live.” Lovis’s mouth split open in an insane grin as he rushed toward Mitsuru, brandishing his scythe. “But I doubt I’ll be able to hold back against an opponent like you! Don’t kill yourself going overboard!”

“You looking down on me, you low-level moron?!”

Lovis swung his scythe, and Mitsuru blocked with his sword.

“I’ll crush you in an instant! Double...Attack Mode!” said Mitsuru, and a red vapor rose from him.

The Gift Skill Mitsuru received from Naiarotop was called Double. It doubled the target stat in exchange for reducing all his other stats. It didn’t matter how much of a level advantage someone had with Mitsuru, they wouldn’t be able to withstand an attack from him. And Lovis was at a far lower level.

Lovis was flung back by the sudden, powerful sword strike from Mitsuru.

“What?!” he cried, crashing into the wall with a loud crunch as dust was kicked up into the air.

“Lovis!” screamed Damia.

“Huh, looks like the only thing big about the NPC was his mouth,” said a triumphant Mitsuru.

Then a magic circle appeared above his head. He noticed it a split second later and leapt backward. Lovis appeared from the circle and swung his scythe down in an arc. Mitsuru dodged the attack by a hair's breadth, but a red scratch ran down his cheek.

"Tsk! Short Gate...one of my favorite spells," said Lovis, sounding amused despite how much blood he was losing. "Well, it's just as I heard. No, in fact that power is even *more* terrifying than I heard. Mitsuru Ijuuin's Double! But it seems the price you pay is quite high. Your

movements seem a little sluggish. I'll get you next time." Lovis tapped his neck with his pointer finger.

"...You seem pretty damn happy, even though you only got close to hitting me. You keep running your mouth and I'll make you regret that you missed. There's too big a gap between our levels, so don't go thinking you've got a shot!"

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LOVIS

"SHORT GATE!"

Lovis evaded Mitsuru's attack with space-time magic. He lashed out with his scythe as he was teleporting.

"Gah!" Mitsuru didn't have time to counterattack—he was too busy defending while turning around. He was trying to send Lovis flying again using his sword and his Double's Attack Mode, but Lovis jumped backward to dodge while quickly striking again.

"Aaah!" Mitsuru shouted as he swung his sword in a wide arc, which Lovis dodged again by leaping backward.

"Oh, how scary. That's a top-tier attack," said Lovis. "And yet, for some reason, it looks like you're begging me not to get closer."

"Cram it," said Mitsuru with a click of his tongue.

“Damn it... My speed stat should still be way higher than yours, even now. Why the hell am I always lagging behind?”

“It’s simple,” said Lovis. “You’ve never really enjoyed a true fight to the death before, have you? Double’s nature let you easily kill any mediocre enemy that showed you an opening, even if they were a higher level. But a fight to the death cultivates experience, and without it, your...let’s call it your *intuition*, won’t develop. You need real skin in the game. Perhaps that’s also the reason you’re not as enthralled by battle as I am. Or maybe there’s some more fundamental difference between us.”

“Huh? What are you on about?”

“I’m saying, I’m gonna show a battle virgin such as yourself what a true fight to the death is.”



“You think an NPC like you can make fun of me?! Now I’m pissed! I was thinking I’d just kick you to the curb with my easy attacks, but screw that! I’ll finish this off with... Double, Speed Mode!” A yellow vapor floated up from Mitsuru’s body. “Dodge this!”

He rushed straight toward Lovis. That rapid dash had all the extra power of Double shifted into the speed stat.

“Good! Good! Ooh, you are making this fun!” cried Lovis. Without even an attempt to dodge, he raised his scythe and took an offensive stance as Mitsuru flew at him.

Mitsuru scowled and glared at Lovis, feeling patronized. “Think you can handle this?!”

Mitsuru thrust his huge sword in a straight line. A thrust was the most difficult attack for his opponent to avoid when using the advantages of Speed Mode. It was difficult to parry because the attack was a single focused point, not the long line of a slash.

Lovis tried to pull his scythe back and block the attack, but he couldn’t fully shift the oncoming blade, and it bit into his right shoulder.

“Urgh.”

“Ha, you did a good job deflecting that attack...but the fight’s over. Your shoulder’s done for. No way you can beat me in Speed Mode with only your left —”

“Yes... The pain is good! Ah ha ha! Yes! I feel the possibility that I may die in the next moments—and that sensation has been entirely obliterated by an overwhelming euphoria! This...this is the battle I’ve been waiting for!” cried Lovis as he flung Mitsuru’s sword aside. This broke Mitsuru’s stance, since Double’s effects had reduced his physical strength.

“Tsk!” Mitsuru shielded his right side with his large sword. He guessed Lovis would swing his scythe with his left arm, since his right shoulder was destroyed, but Lovis tightened his right hand on the scythe. “Are you nuts?!”

Mitsuru slammed his sword across to block the scythe with its blade. Lovis

followed up with another rapid attack from the left that sent Mitsuru stumbling.

“Shit!” In his desperation, Mitsuru used Speed Mode’s strength to force distance between him and Lovis. The scythe came down in a large arc, and its blade smashed the floor right next to Mitsuru’s foot.

Mitsuru gulped. His defense was greatly decreased while in Speed mode. If he had been even a little less lucky, he would have lost a foot.

“Ha ha! Ah ha ha! This is fun! This is so much fun, Mitsuru! Of all my opponents, you burn the brightest!”

Mitsuru didn’t have time to find his footing or collect his thoughts before Lovis came at him again. He gritted his teeth, raised his sword, and leapt forward. “No way you can beat my top speed!”

He immediately closed the distance between them with Speed Mode. He jumped sideways and thrust his sword directly at Lovis’s chest. Yet even at that absurd speed, Lovis cleanly evaded the attack by twisting his body.

“N-no way... My speed stat should be, like, twice yours,” said Mitsuru.

“I intentionally took your first attack head on to gauge you. Now I know I can handle you! It was well worth a small wound in my shoulder.”

Lovis swung his scythe at Mitsuru. Mitsuru blocked at the last moment, but Lovis followed through with a kick that hit deep into Mitsuru’s stomach.

“Gagh!” Mitsuru flew backward and tumbled across the floor. “Gah, agh, argh! N-no way! How the hell...could you...? Even though...my Double?!” Mitsuru scrambled to sit up so he could glare at Lovis.

“This was fun...but I suppose this was all I could expect from you once I figured out your deal,” said Lovis. “It’s a difference in the number of battles to the death we’ve seen. Your movements lack deeper refinement. You seem almost entirely...self-taught. It’s as if you have managed to entirely make do by overwhelming your opponent’s stats with your Double. That means you’ve never really had the opportunity to hone your fighting skills. The fact that you switch your body’s abilities without care is proof you lack finesse. You move without thought, swing without thought, and pray your opponent won’t be able

to respond.”

“Argh!” Mitsuru bit his lip hard.

“Oh, Mitsuru Ijuuin! I thought you would be a little more capable. At this rate, the only pure human opponent that could rival me is Orcus, Guardian of the Kingdom.”

“Who said I’m giving it my all? You don’t get to judge me,” said Mitsuru. He used his sword as a crutch to push himself to his feet, then brandished it in Lovis’s direction.

“Stop with the bluster. You’ve got no other—”

“I’ve got this problem where I get hotheaded and make simple attacks. It’s just like Grandpa Lizard said in the Garden of the Dragons. Pisses me off to admit it, but yeah, I never got much chance to learn how to use a sword, and I haven’t had many close-knuckle fights. So, you know what? Yeah. It looks like I can’t squash you with sheer strength or speed. I’m gonna have to make a bit of an effort for you.” Mitsuru held his sword at mid-height, around his waist. “I’ve got the advantage in levels, so I don’t need to be rushing in like a moron. Double...Defense Mode.”

A blue vapor rose from Mitsuru as he squatted down low.

“Don’t insult me. You’re trying to fight *me* with lowered speed?” said Lovis. “But that stance is different from everything you’ve used so far. That’s not self-taught, is it?”

“It’s not my stats I’m changing now. I’m changing how I fight. Gramps specially modified the dragonkin fighting styles for my own personal sword fighting style. I’ll tell you this, *reaper*, none of your attacks are going to work on me from here on out.”

“You,” Lovis sneered, “really are incredible. Imagine still having entertainment value left this late in the game.”

MITSURU KEPT HIS SWORD at the mid guard and slowly advanced toward Lovis.

“Ah,” said Lovis. “This sword style focuses on pressuring your opponent into attacking first so you can counterattack. This is nearly the opposite of your earlier, impulsive style.”

Mitsuru clicked his tongue. He learned this sword style from Odio, a Holy Dragon in the Garden of the Dragons. The fighting style was originally meant for dragonkin, but Odio modified the fundamentals until it was a sword style a human could use. As a bonus, it compensated for Mitsuru’s weaknesses.

Kanata had been there when Mitsuru refused Odio’s offer to make him his pupil because he had complete confidence in his own strength and resourcefulness. He didn’t think he needed a teacher. But then he was completely embarrassed in front of Kanata during the Dragon Trials. He ended up with a score lower than even that blowhard Raigan. Humiliated into changing his mind, Mitsuru became Odio’s pupil for a short time.

“Standard tactics when you find yourself against a defensively strong opponent is to keep your enemy at a distance and control their movements with magic attacks or thrown weapons, then swoop in and finish them off when you see a crack in their defenses. However...” said Lovis before lunging straight toward Mitsuru. “I’m not sure I can hold myself back! Let me see this dragonkin sword fighting or whatever it is! Don’t let me down!”

“Dragon Fortress.” Mitsuru flipped his sword so it was pointing down, his bottom hand moved to the top and the hilt at head height, the blade pointing almost directly down to the floor.

“That stance protects the head and chest while allowing for easy counter attacks,” murmured Lovis.

While that stance allowed someone to protect the vital parts of their body, it lacked protection for the arms and legs. This fighting style was for dragonkin, not fragile humans without scales or claws. However, Mitsuru had boosted his defense with Double. Even if he did suffer an injury, he could immediately counter with an attack that did far more damage to his opponent than he received.

“Aha. Yes, this is similar to how dragonkin fight,” said Lovis. “This is entirely different from before. Perhaps I need to be cautious.”

Lovis was able to fight with an advantage against Mitsuru because Mitsuru used his Double skill to make up for a sloppy fighting style. Everything changed if Mitsuru was actually using a sword style that matched his skills.

Lovis dropped his speed just before he closed in on Mitsuru, but Mitsuru grinned.

“Flashing Tail!” Mitsuru took a huge step forward, thrusting his head in a downward arc as he swiped his sword out to slash Lovis. The sword technique let him attack with one hand from the defensive stance of Dragon Fortress. It was a surprise attack made when an approaching opponent assumed a counterattack would follow his parry, and it permitted Mitsuru to strike with a powerful, wide swing.

“What?!” Lovis twisted out of the way, avoiding the blade by a hair’s breadth.

“Talon Dance!”

Without a moment’s delay, Mitsuru pivoted and slashed out with a motion as graceful as a dance. Lovis fell a step behind with each additional strike.

Odio’s Mitsuru-focused, dragonkin-derived fighting style knocked even Lovis off guard. Mitsuru’s strength and speed were reduced at the moment, but because of that, he gave up on attempts at sheer strength and prioritized techniques that would surely land hits.

Lovis failed to get any half-hearted counterattacks through Mitsuru’s Double defense either. His movements were severely restricted as he tried to pull off fatal strikes, rather than weaker but technically perfect moves like Mitsuru.

“Ha ha ha, you were bragging up a storm about your experience in fights to the death, but I can beat you with just a bit of good technique!” said Mitsuru. “I should thank you, reaper! You’re pushing me to higher peaks of performance! Can’t believe Gramps’s sword style would be this effective!” He laughed as he swung his sword.

“How the heck did he get the upper hand on Lovis?” cried Damia as he raised his arm, aiming a spell at Mitsuru.

But Yozakura pointed her blade at his back. “Lower your arm, Damia. Lovis hates when someone interferes with his fight.”

“B-but at this rate—”

“You underestimate him. Lovis himself said he longs to die in battle... And I guarantee you that Lovis *will* be the winner.” Yozakura never doubted him for a second.

“Haaah!” Mitsuru swung. His blade slashed across Lovis’s chest and sent a stream of blood flowing out. “Not too deep, but it feels like you’re out of moves, reaper. I’ll finish this soon.”

“I see... This is a creative and flexible sword style. But you’ve already shown me 60 percent of the base forms and their variations.”

“Huh?”

“I was thinking I’d let you live once this ended, but...excessive self-preservation would be an insult to both of us in this fight. Mitsuru Ijuuin, starting now, you leave me no option but to fight with the intent to kill you.” Lovis brandished his scythe. His body was bathed in blood. “I’ll give you one last warning... You haven’t fully adapted to that dragonkin sword style. You would alter it as you developed, and only then would it be fully perfected. You had an incredible teacher. However, it won’t be difficult for me to handle you since you’ve barely begun learning the moves. This is where your life ends, unless you kill me before it comes to that.”

Mitsuru’s body stiffened. Lovis’s murderous aura and madness overwhelmed him. It was like nothing he’d ever experienced before, not even from the worst of monsters.

“Bring it on!” he shouted back.

– 9 –

LOVIS

MITSURU’S SWORD SKILLS from the Garden of the Dragons initially drove Lovis

onto the back foot, but the momentum shifted slowly with each strike. Lovis was pushed to his limits, but he continued to weave through Mitsuru's attacks as he memorized them.

Another difference between the two was Lovis's abnormal mental state which prevented his spirit from flagging during this mortal fray. Mitsuru's movements grew clumsier as his body and mind fatigued from their potentially deadly back-and-forth, but Lovis stayed sharp.

"Ha ha ha! How do you feel now? Can you keep pace with my dancing, Mitsuru Ijuuin?!" cried Lovis, still swinging his scythe despite his blood-drenched form.

Lovis had entered a flow state from his extreme excitement. Pain and fatigue were no longer factors. He fought on, never once dropping speed.

If this keeps going...I'm going to lose! thought Mitsuru. *I'll have to risk it!*

The vapor rising from Mitsuru's body changed from blue to yellow. "Double... Speed Mode!" He sprang up from the floor and dashed toward Lovis.

"Do you really think you can defeat me without your dragonkin sword skills?!" said Lovis. "Or, are you thinking of running?"

The skills Mitsuru learned were based on traditional dragonkin techniques that required him to be in Defense Mode—it was the only way to ensure he was sturdy enough to complete the forms properly. Using it in his base state would only result in wounds to his arms and legs that would slowly bleed him dry.

"This is a gamble, but I got no choice!" said Mitsuru. He leapt into the air, kicked off from the wall behind him, and flew toward Lovis. "Dragon Technique: Whirling Fang!"

"Is that...a direct attack? You're betting everything on speed so you can fire your body at me like a cannonball? *That's* your last resort? You disappoint me." Lovis took half a step back and turned his scythe toward Mitsuru. If Mitsuru was heading at him directly, Lovis could easily deflect Mitsuru's blade and finish him with his scythe.

"Double...Attack Mode!" Mitsuru switched out his Double mode in midair. His dash flowed into a twisting cartwheel; he brought his sword screaming down

upon Lovis.

“What?!” cried Lovis.

Whirling Fang was originally conceived as a head on attack that utilized the naturally high stats of a dragonkin, combined with irregular movements from their wings. Mitsuru replicated those effects by switching out the decreases and increases to his stats that Double applied.

By increasing his speed, then catapulting himself into the air before switching his Double mode, Mitsuru could draw on his heightened offensive ability while still maintaining his speed. It also meant he momentarily shifted to irregular movements that his opponent couldn't predict. Only Mitsuru himself could predict the slight changes in movement and inertia that occurred when he switched Double.

– 10 –

LOVIS

IT WAS ODIO'S IDEA to turn Whirling Fang into a sword technique, but it was more difficult to control than the original skill intended for dragonkin.

Mitsuru had never successfully pulled it off.

“I'll cut you down!” cried Mitsuru. His sword swung, smashed Lovis's scythe out of the way, and headed straight for Lovis's chest.

Lovis twisted and leapt backward, but he failed to get completely clear of the sword's trajectory. The blade bit deep, and the force pushed Lovis's back into the wall. He crumpled to the ground, as if sitting, and shuddered.

Blood flowed from his mouth. Blood leaked from his body. Blood soaked his clothes.

He'd taken a hit from Mitsuru who was both a higher level and also strengthened by Double. It wouldn't be surprising for that strike to have killed him outright.

“L-Lovis...lost?” said Damia. His voice shook with disbelief.

“Huff... Huff... Dammit, that move tires me out,” said Mitsuru. “Huff... But I finally managed to do it. In a real fight at that. Might be a lower level than me, but you really gave me a hard time... Gotta admit, you’re definitely the second strongest dude I’ve ever fought. And I probably won’t even gain any levels.” After swearing, Mitsuru raised his sword again and stepped toward the unmoving Lovis. “I’ll remember you, reaper.”

He raised his sword to strike, but Yozakura swung at him from behind.

Mitsuru spun around and knocked her katana back with his sword. She rushed forward to position herself between him and Lovis.

“Yo, samurai lady, pretty sure this wasn’t what you promised,” said Mitsuru as he glared at her suspiciously.

“I don’t remember promising *you* anything, you uncultured interloper!” she spat, her eyes narrowed in a glare.

“Y-Yozakura, Lovis said we shouldn’t get involved! And didn’t you say you didn’t want to see any more disgusting attachment to life from him?!” asked Damia, cutting in.

“I merely admire Lovis’s noble warrior soul and didn’t want to see it tarnished,” said Yozakura. “I shan’t make any unsightly attempts to resist my death. ...But perhaps the boy who picked a fight with three people and expected to fight them one at a time was the one being naive here.”

“Tsk, you think I’m tired from my fight with that guy? I’ll send all three of you NPCs back to the devkit you came from,” said Mitsuru as he raised his sword anew.

Lovis stood unsteadily behind Yozakura.

“Sir, you’re awa—ah!” Yozakura started.

Still covered in blood, Lovis swung his scythe at Yozakura, casting her aside. Freshly drawn blood splattered the ground where she fell.

“What the hell? You attacked your flunky, who was protecting you?” asked Mitsuru.

“Forgive her, she was being rude,” said Lovis before spinning his scythe in a circle to bring the tip skating across his own stomach. His clothes tore and a deep gash appeared. He smiled, as if somehow immune to the pain, then spun his scythe and held it at the ready again. “Now, are you ready for round two? Oh, Mitsuru, today is truly the best day of my life.”

He was covered in blood and clearly on death’s doorstep. It was a wonder he was even standing. Even so, his movements hadn’t dulled in the slightest. It felt like his body was being manipulated by invisible strings.

“Tsk, you’re putting me on the spot...” said Mitsuru. “You’re nuts. But all right. We got this far, might as well see it to the end.”

Mitsuru talked a tough game, but his expression was tense. Lovis had lost consciousness after taking that hit from the Whirling Fang, but now he was back up.

...And the aura he was giving off was more powerful than before.

– 11 –

LOVIS

“DOUBLE...Defense Mode!”

Blue vapor rose from Mitsuru as he fell back on the sword skills he learned from Odio. This fighting style was better at defense than offense, so it should be perfect for safely finishing off the moribund Lovis.

Mitsuru was happy to take a pass on another direct attack which would have him walking the same hellbound path as Lovis. If he dragged out the fight long enough, then Lovis would eventually drop due to blood loss.

“Sorry, I’m not planning on dying today, reaper.” Mitsuru swapped his hands around and fell into the defense stance of Dragon Fortress.

Lovis gave a disconcerting, monstrous grin before rushing straight for Mitsuru.

“Short Gate!” Lovis was surrounded in light, and then he disappeared. A

moment later, he appeared right up in Mitsuru's face.

"Ignoring blind spots, huh?!" said Mitsuru. He blocked the scythe with his sword, then quickly lashed out toward Lovis's belly.

Lovis bent his left arm and blocked the blow with his elbow. The flesh split; there was an undeniable sound of bone breaking.

"What the...?" said Mitsuru.

"Gya ha ha ha ha!" shrieked Lovis as he slashed Mitsuru's abdomen with his scythe.

Mitsuru leapt back, his left hand pressed over the wound. "C-crap!"

Mitsuru assumed Lovis would dodge his sword attack. Lovis should have had plenty of time to do so. Instead, he'd opted to make a nearly suicidal counterstrike on Mitsuru.

"You're insane!" shouted Mitsuru, Lovis's scythe already flying his way by the time he raised his head. "Gah!"

He flung the attack aside with his sword and retreated backward. Lovis was forcing his right arm to handle the scythe alone while his left arm hung limply at his side. Its force was reduced from using it one-handed, but Lovis maintained speed by swinging from his hips. He fought like a lunatic, an out-of-control animal on its deathbed. And yet, there were no openings in his movements.

Even though Mitsuru's Garden of the Dragons sword fighting style had given him the upper hand against Lovis so far, it was clear he was lagging behind Lovis's death frenzy.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?!" shouted Mitsuru, trying to rally against the assault.

Lovis had reached such a peak in his flow state that he'd essentially entered a battle trance. His mind was filled with euphoria, his consciousness clearly focused on the most vital aspects of his perception. The world around him seemed to move slowly. His physical abilities were enhanced far beyond their limits, all to ensure his opponent went to his grave. He was no longer human, simply a weapon.

“Y-Yozakura, are you okay?” said Damia as he tended to his comrade.

Yozakura narrowly opened her eyes. She watched in ecstasy as Lovis fought. “Congratulations...Lovis...” she said. “You’ve finally...reached that place you’ve always dreamed of... The apex of a warrior god...”

In that moment, every cell in Lovis’s body lived only to fight. He had assumed the true form of the reaper.

It wasn’t something that Mitsuru could endure.

As they exchanged blows, Mitsuru realized that there was no way he was going to defeat Lovis by buying time in a defensive stance. Nothing in Lovis’s mind or body held him back or kept him in control. Nothing would stop him now other than his own death—or Mitsuru’s.

Grandpa Lizard’s sword techniques aren’t working at all now! thought Mitsuru. *Even if I happen to hit him, he’s not going down!*

Mitsuru’s only option was to strike again with Whirling Fang and make sure he killed Lovis. This battle would end at nothing else.

Lovis shouldn’t be able to handle the fast, irregular movement of Whirling Fang. Not even Mitsuru, the user, had a full grasp of the trajectory he’d take. His movements changed as he moved rapidly through the air and sent his body cartwheeling as he switched out his Double modes. That wasn’t something that battle instinct alone could defend against.

Whirling Fang had a weak spot though. Lovis was in a battle frenzy, and it was entirely possible that he would choose not to evade...but it was also possible he would use Short Gate to cleanly dodge. If that happened, Mitsuru would be left without a target.

Whirling Fang burned through a lot of his physical energy, and the next time he used the form in this fight would likely be the last.

“Gotta take the risk,” said Mitsuru. “It’s my only hope of winning! Double... Speed Mode!”

A yellow vapor rose from his body. He immediately leapt, flying backward in order to use Whirling Fang.

“Ah ha ha ha!” Lovis moved forward, barely a hair’s breadth away from Mitsuru as he committed to fighting head-on. Mitsuru kicked off from the wall behind him, betting everything on this move, and flew straight at Lovis.

“Whirling Fang!”

Launching himself forward, he switched to Double’s Attack Mode in midair, twisted his body, and added the irregular movements into his trajectory. Lovis chose not to evade with Short Gate. His scythe was at the ready, a disturbing smile still plastered on his face as he met Mitsuru’s assault.

Mitsuru aimed at Lovis and brought his sword around for the strike. In that moment, he felt like Lovis was accurately tracking his movement. It wasn’t a misperception—Lovis’s eyes were absolutely keeping up with the movements of Whirling Fang. Mitsuru couldn’t believe it, but he couldn’t think of any other explanation.

“No turning back now!” Mitsuru told himself, and then he swung his sword.

Lovis leaned far back and jumped into the air to evade the blade. Mitsuru would have no further strength left to fight Lovis if he let him get away now. He drove his sword with all his might toward his enemy.

And the Whirling Fang split Lovis’s body.

“Ahaagh!” Lovis was repelled by the force of the impact, his body crashing once, then twice into the floor as he bounced away.

“Yeah... Ha ha... I won...” said Mitsuru. There was no doubt, he felt his strike connect. His victory was certain.

Just as Lovis was about to strike the floor again, he curled his body and regained control of his movement to land neatly.

“N-no way...” said Mitsuru.

Lovis had nerfed the worst of the strike by jumping backward just before Whirling Fang connected. What would have been a fatal blow was deflected away from the vital parts of his body.

All thought had left Lovis’s brain by this point. Only raw fighting instinct remained. He was simply an automaton programmed to survive and kill. Pain

was simply a signal that informed his movements in order to achieve those goals.

Mitsuru breathed heavily and sank to his knees. He knew he'd done what he could. He accomplished that which lay beyond his own abilities. Lovis slowly walked up, weapon in hand.

"Dammit, how the hell...is he so tough?!" said Mitsuru as he smacked his legs, trying to will them back into motion. If he didn't move now, Lovis would kill him and it would all be over.

But Mitsuru himself knew he couldn't fight anymore. Lovis's scythe had left him severely wounded, and he'd lost a lot of blood. Using Double to its full potential had placed additional strain on his body. He'd bet everything on that last Whirling Fang, and now he lacked the strength to stand.

"L-Lovis... I've never seen him like this," said Damia. "I didn't realize he was this terrifying..." He watched Lovis with awe. Yozakura, for her part, looked at their leader with utter satisfaction.

"Ah ha ha ha!" Lovis rushed toward Mitsuru.

"A-agh... No! Is this...the end?!" cried Mitsuru, tears streaming from his eyes.

He'd assumed his death was near the moment he'd come to Locklore...but now he stared on as the inevitable approached.

"Ah ha!"

Lovis swung his scythe back and leapt. Mitsuru pounded the floor out of sheer frustration, leaning forward to expose his neck.

Lovis sailed right over Mitsuru.

"Huh?"

He chucked his scythe away and landed in a formal seiza sitting position, skidding across the floor on his knees as the cloth covering them shredded away from the friction. He lowered his forehead to the floor, not stopping his slide.

"It's so good to see you after so long, Kanata!"

Lovis regained his sanity at the feet of a black-haired young man.

“...Uh, what’s going on?” Kanata asked, looking confused.

In the background, Yozakura and Damia stared at Lovis’s back with looks of shock and contempt. It was the fastest transition from battle fury to groveling the world had ever seen.



Chapter 5:

The Judge of Avarice

– 1 –

I WAS CONFUSED after breaking into Grede's mansion.

In one ravaged hall lay the scattered remains of golems...and Yozakura, who was wounded but still wearing the same ornate Japanese-style clothes as usual. Damia was there too, equipped with his patented goggles. But I also found Mitsuru, the traveler I met in the Garden of the Dragons, and he seemed to have life-threatening injuries.

Lastly, there was Lovis. He slid into a groveling bow in front of me, his entire body soaked with blood.

This was weird.

"Uh, so... What's going on?" I asked. Lovis jumped. He didn't raise his head, instead keeping his face hidden like he was thinking. Or perhaps he was trying to come up with some excuse. "L-Lovis-san?"

"Oh. Nothing much, really..." said Lovis.

"It looks like...something," I said. At the very least, they'd ended up with three severely injured people.

"I-I heard Grede was the cause of the troubles in Ploroque, so I came to defeat him. However, his golems were more stubborn than I anticipated."

"Uh-huh..." It generally made sense, but something seemed off. I looked around the room. "So...do these golems bleed?"

Lovis jerked his head up and looked back toward the scythe that he'd thrown aside. His face was as white as a sheet. "Well, there were complications!"

"You look badly injured. Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes, yep. I'm confident in the condition of my body. Thank you for your

concern—”

“Were these golems equipped with blades?” I asked, and Lovis clamped his mouth shut.

“Er... Would you believe me if I said yes?” he said after a moment.

“Probably not... Aaanyway, I’m in a hurry. Would you mind telling me what’s going on?”

I was concerned with how Lovis was acting, but more pressingly, I still didn’t know if Philia was safe. I considered asking someone else, but Mitsuru was staring at Lovis with his mouth hanging open and a deep furrow between his brows. He didn’t look like he had a grasp of what was going on either.

What I was certain of was that Lovis fought with the golems, then he met Mitsuru. Then something else happened. And now three people in the room were nearly dead.

“O-okay...” said Lovis. “The truth is...I defeated the golems and tried to move on. Then that guy mistook me for one of Grede’s allies and attacked me!” He pointed at Mitsuru like a child blaming another. “Yes, that’s it! We’ve dealt with worse, ya know? So we just wanted to move on, but then he started saying he would rather beat us up than Grede!”

“...In a situation like this?”

“Yes! I was surprised too! Think how many more people would die if we don’t neutralize Grede as soon as possible!”

“I know it’s Mitsuru-san you’re talking about, but I’m not sure he’d do something like that...”

“There was a squadron of royal knights risking their lives for the country in a brutal fight against the golems outside! He waltzed right past them and came here! He’s a selfish man obsessed with battle, nothing more!”

“But you also had to go past them to get here...?”

“...And it pained me to do so! But I knew I had to stop Grede as soon as possible! I’m sure he has more tricks than just those Golems up his sleeve! There’s no way he only prepared a fighting force to take out that squad of royal

knights.”

Nothing he said felt like a blatant lie, but this seemed awfully fishy nonetheless. I flip-flopped between decisions twice, three times.

“Anyway,” continued Lovis, “that’s why I decided I’d have to make him do as I said, *gently*! But he was coming at me with intent to kill. I was thinking of ways to shake him off and make my way to Grede. Right?! You two, I said that, didn’t I?!” He looked at Yozakura and Damia, his eyes pleading.

“Hey, has your boss...got split personalities or something?” groaned Mitsuru. “What’s with this weirdo?”

“No comment,” said Damia after the two lackeys whispered a conversation between themselves. Yozakura, who lay in Damia’s arms, had a look of such abject fury on her face that it could kill.

I didn’t know what was going on, but at this point I didn’t care.

“Damia! I said I’d handle him quickly and end the fight, didn’t I?!” said Lovis.

“Y-yes... But in the end—”

“But I did say it!”

“You did,” muttered Damia, his head hung low.

“I thought you were dead, Lovis,” I said. “The reports said you were killed by the Cup of Blood in Manaloch.”

“That was actually...” Something about Lovis’s expression changed. He looked like he realized something. “During that incident, I met a *goddess*! I had a change of heart. I dissolved the Black Reapers and started a journey of repentance. So, it’s not wrong to say that I *did* die that day...and was reborn!”

“A goddess...?” Had Lovis joined a cult?

“The White Goddess, with one emerald and one crimson eye. I decided to dedicate my life to good actions through her guidance.”

“Y-you met Lunaère?!”

“Ah, so her name is Lunaère!”

“You...know her?”

“Yes, yes! I do!” Lovis bobbed his head up and down.

If he did meet Lunaère, then I wanted to ask him about it in detail, but...that seemed like a longer story than I had time for right now.

“I’m not sure I understand everything,” I said, “But I think I get the gist. Things are moving quickly, so...I’m heading to Grede. One of my friends was kidnapped by him.”

“Oh, yes?!” said Lovis. “Then you must hurry! I would offer my assistance if I could provide even the slightest

help, but I’d be but a hindrance. Go on and don’t worry about us!”

“Y-yeah...” I looked away from Lovis, who was bobbing his head as frantically as ever, and looked toward Mitsuru. He was frowning from his seat on the ground. “Uh...Lovis-san, you look like you can still move. Would you mind taking Mitsuru-san somewhere safe? I’m not sure what was going on between you two, but...he’s not a bad guy.”

“You’ve been calling him by name. Is he a friend of yours?” asked Lovis.

“W-we...know each other.”

The blood drained from Lovis’s face. “Yes, yes, of course! If he’s a friend of yours, then I will take complete responsibility for his safety! Okay, Damia and Yozakura, let’s carry Mitsuru, Kanata’s good friend!”

“Y-yes, sir,” said Damia hesitantly.

– 2 –

PHILIA

“ONCE HE WAS the Lord of Merchants, the man took control of the kingdom’s economy and developed magical weapons and assumed he could become the king of this country. A foolish thought. Perhaps his run

of success put the idea in his head. Perhaps he simply needed to aim ever higher or lose his zest for life.”

Grede stood in the parlor, continuing his story to Philia.

“He even tried developing homunculi that could be used as magic weapons. Alas, the process proved difficult. There were many failures and a mountain of rejected duds.”

“Failures and rejects...” said Philia hesitantly.

“Yes. The experiments were expensive and resulted in much waste, but the evidence couldn’t be allowed to get out. His plan might be revealed if that happened. The husks were smashed to pieces, and then the evidence was burned away by magic until nothing remained. Then portions of the cores were reused. This cycle continued. ...For years.”

Grede spoke of cruel acts. For some reason though, Philia thought Grede looked to be enjoying it. She hadn’t yet figured out what Grede’s true intentions were. Was he confessing to repent for these acts?

“Did you...tell people to do that too?” asked Philia.

“All people are capable of cruelty. A human’s greed chokes out their virtue, leaving them to masquerade as a good person... Ha! Only failures cannot determine how to satisfy their own greed!”

“Philia doesn’t think that’s true...”

“Oh? I wonder who’s right, you or me? If I scatter just a tiny bit of cash around Ploroque, every single one of them would turn into a kicking, biting monster to get at it! Ha ha ha! It’s hilarious!” Grede’s large body jiggled as he let out a disturbing laugh.

Philia looked at Grede with sorrow in her eyes. He shied away from her gaze awkwardly and cleared his throat.

“After investing a massive fortune—and discarding and recreating countless sacrifices—the man created two homunculi that could be considered complete,” said Grede, continuing the story. “There was Adam, specialized in combat and capable of repeated autonomous evolution...and then there was Eve. Eve specialized in espionage and possessed an ability to alter her form.

“Both Adam and Eve were stored securely. Adam could achieve infinite power

through his autonomous evolution, while Eve's shapeshifting abilities could destroy peace if left unchecked. These homunculi were so powerful, either one could bring the world to ruin if they escaped. So they were hidden away, where the two fell in love."

"Love...?" Philia blinked, surprised at the unexpected turn in the story.

"Yes. Love. They lived in the same environment, and they had only one another to trust. Perhaps it was fate. The man laughed at them—two fake humans falling in fake love. Absurd! And yet, he used it as leverage against them. If one of them grew defiant, he would punish the other. And knowing that, he was finally able to leash those infernal homunculi and force them to do as he said!"

Philia looked at Grede reproachfully as he crowed. Grede seemed to notice, but it didn't stop him.

"Then Adam attempted to escape during combat training. Not just that...! He tried to take Eve with him! The fool. He was just a fake human, yet he drank too deeply of his love and started thinking of himself as the hero of some tragic story. In the end...the love the man had allowed between the homunculi caused them to run wild." Grede shook his head in exasperation.

"Philia...doesn't think it's dumb."

"There were deaths as a result. It was easy to neutralize the pair, thankfully. Eve's transformation powers were dangerous, but she surrendered when Adam was captured. Adam, though... He suffered serious damage. The man feared Adam's fighting capability, you see, and so he had his private soldiers attack without restraint. Everything would have been fine if the damage had been limited to Adam's body, but his core was broken beyond repair. It was clear he didn't have long."

"Adam...died?"

Grede's head rotated from side to side on its thick neck. "No. He had the ability to evolve himself by joining with other living creatures or substances. The man brought Adam back from the brink of death by providing him with the materials necessary to recover. He succeeded in saving his life. The homunculus may have gone out of control, but that didn't change the fact that he was a

masterpiece of a magic weapon. After that...the man refused to let the two homunculi see each other and threatened to destroy the other if one caused problems. But he also told Adam that if he behaved well for three years, he would allow the two to meet again. The man *promised*. Adam believed him and did as he said.”

“What happened after that?”

“...Three years passed, then five. The promise wasn’t kept. Over the long months and years, Adam realized that Eve died long ago,” said Grede as he turned to look at the painting behind him—the one of the young girl on a swing in the field of flowers. “The materials the man used to revive Adam were those of Eve. The materials from the only other success case. When their escape failed, the man considered the difficulty of keeping two unruly homunculi, and it was a perfect opportunity. Out of the two, Adam’s easy-to-understand combat abilities were more valuable. The promise to meet again was nothing but a lie to give Adam hope and control him.”

Philia followed the direction of Grede’s gaze, and her eyes settled on the painting of the girl with him.

“Adam was overcome by emotion...and having realized he’d taken in parts of Eve, he became aware that he had also taken her abilities. Adam’s greatest strength was always the ability to evolve based on the target he absorbed. Adam used Eve’s powers of transformation to slip from his jail with plans to rebel again.”

“And then?”

“Adam had been imprisoned in a supposedly impenetrable underground facility. But with Adam’s strong combat capability, Eve’s transformative powers, and a will to do everything in his power to escape... The battle was horrifyingly long. And, in the end...”

Just then, hurried footsteps could be heard approaching the door to the parlor. Grede looked questioningly toward the door as it burst open, and one of Grede’s subordinates rushed in.

“Every damn time... Could you at least knock?” roared Grede.

“Sir! We have a problem! People far more powerful than the royal knight squad have appeared and are approaching the mansion! There are several who seem to be on par with S-rank adventurers! Lord Grede, you must flee to the underground location in the black quarter!” cried the man.

“They brought out that sort of power already?” said Grede grumpily.

This was progressing far more quickly than Grede originally anticipated, and he’d neglected dealing with the situation personally because he was entertaining Philia. The original plan called for Grede to flee to the underground base the moment the royal knights attacked. He had several elite golems of nearly level 200 stored there as insurance.

“Why are you so busy with this little girl?!” asked Grede’s subordinate.

“On par with an S-rank adventurers, hm? I suppose I have no choice. I’d hoped to keep Adam out of this,” said Grede as he let out a long sigh and walked toward the door.

“A-Adam?” murmured Philia, recognizing the familiar name from Grede’s story. It meant Adam was still alive, but she didn’t understand why he would submit to Grede.

“A secret weapon?” said Grede’s subordinate. “Lord Grede, are you hiding something in the mansion? I hadn’t heard anything—”

“Attend to my guest,” said Grede, grabbing the man’s chin and bringing their faces close. “Do not leave this room for any reason. If you do, I’ll have your head.”

“Eek! Y-yes, my lord!”

Grede then glanced at Philia and said, “I’ll be back soon, little miss. Be good.”

“Uh...okay,” said Philia with a small, hesitant nod.

Be good. Somehow the innocent words seemed like a threat.

I LEFT LOVIS and the others and proceeded deeper into the mansion in search of Philia. I came to a large staircase leading up to the third floor and realized someone was standing at the top.

“You don’t appear to be a royal knight. If I’m not mistaken, you are Kanata Kanbara. The traveler assisting The Pixie’s Wingbeats, am I correct?”

One look was enough to tell me that I’d stumbled across Grede, the Lord of Merchants. He was a large, ominous man that didn’t seem quite human to me. His round, chubby face had seemed unwrinkled and ageless. It was creepy, like he was wearing a mask.

“Your employees already ran away,” I said. “Do you mind coming down?”

“You’ve come this far. You must understand that there is nothing as important as a single, absolutely powerful individual. The little people are just here to liven things up. Power is authority. And that’s why that man tried to make a homunculus.” Grede slowly walked down the stairs toward me.

“That man...?”

“I would like to ask you politely to leave. I did promise the girl that I would not touch you or the others, after all. However, I did ask her to understand that my courtesy would only last so long as you don’t touch me. If you advance any farther, you’ll leave me little choice.”

“Now that I know Philia’s in the mansion, I’m not leaving. Your golems in the garden and lobby are all defeated. It’s over.”

“My, oh, my, the little miss will be very unhappy with me.”

I couldn’t understand why he was acting so confident, facing an adventurer without any guards. He wasn’t surrendering. If I could take Grede hostage, then any remaining subordinates and golems wouldn’t try to resist. If Grede resisted... Well, he didn’t look that tough.

I remained unarmed and cautious of my surroundings as I moved to grab Grede, but he evaded with surprising quickness and slipped away at the last moment. He then reached out toward my neck.

“Huh?!” I swiped his arm aside and kicked him in the stomach.

He flipped neatly in the air and landed. “How tremendously bothersome. You’re no mere S-rank adventurer. Complicating factors are always annoying... though, perhaps I should have seen this coming, since you had the girl with you. You remind me of myself,” muttered Grede in vexation.

“Who *are* you?” I asked. “You’re not just a merchant.”

Even on a low estimate, he couldn’t be anything less than level 1,000. But that was impossible. I’d never heard anyone talk about Grede being high level. He was supposed to be a simple merchant who’d worked his way up to lord.

“Hmph, and here I’d wanted to take over the kingdom as a human,” said Grede—seconds before his body ballooned. He transformed before my eyes into an incomprehensibly strange creature. His face lost all life, becoming two masks which emerged from the mass of flesh. A huge, inhuman mouth gaped below them.

Grede lurched. I expected him to fall forward, but he got down on all four of his bulging limbs as a spined tail grew slowly from his back. He looked like some kind of giant toad monster with a scorpion’s tail. He was stranger than anything I’d ever fought before.

He swung that barbed tail, its stinger aimed at me.

“What the heck are you?!” I shouted, drawing my sword and pointing it toward Grede.

ADAM

Race: Chimera Homunculus

Lv: 3000

HP: 14394/15000

MP: 12000/12000

“Level 3,000?!” That shouldn’t be possible.

Naiarotop and the Unseen Hand of the Gods hated high-level beings they

couldn't control. Could Grede be one of the Unseen Hand?

That wasn't my only question. This thing had ceased to be Grede in any definition. What on earth was going on?

"What did you do with Grede? Are you his secret double?!" I asked.

"I *am* Grede, Lord of Merchants! If that man had continued his destructive management of the city with his repeated gambles, Ploroque's finances were as good as doomed. The city would have died! Information on his sloppy and infantile plans to revolt would have leaked long ago. At best, he would have grown old and senile before fading away... Could a greedy, narrowminded, inferior creature like a *human* accomplish what I have? I alone, with my ageless wisdom, successfully turned Ploroque into the greatest city in Locklore!"

Grede opened his massive mouth and roared with laughter.

I gulped. People talked about Grede looking oddly young despite being nearly eighty years old. The rumors said he'd devoted himself to black magic and used that to become young again, but now it looked like he'd been replaced by a homunculus.

Rosemonde had mentioned something before. She said there was an incident in Ploroque where people died during some sort of magical weapon experiment. That was probably when Grede was replaced.

I saw three large, jagged crystals arrange themselves behind Grede. A cog-like mechanism interlocked with the three crystals as they all rotated. I'd never seen anything like it before, and yet it seemed very familiar.

MECHANICAL MOON

Value Class: Godly

Crystals imbued with evil magic.

This device was developed in order to mass produce Moons of the Abyss, crystals formed through alchemy using the blood of thirteen demon kings.

It is powered by the cores of several homunculi.

“Mechanical Moon...?”

My déjà vu was justified. The Moon of the Abyss was the item embedded in Mother, the spider demon king. It caused her level to skyrocket. If that item could be massproduced, the balance of this world was clearly broken.

“But why is a homunculus starting a revolution?!” I asked.

“Why?! Hmph, let me tell you.” Grede’s huge mouth opened to reveal his fangs. “I. Hate. Humans. You are greedy, disgusting creatures—so much so that it frightens me! The more a human denies their greed, the uglier they are when their falsehoods are peeled away. That’s why I will take over this world and turn it into a place like Ploroque. Pure capitalism! A truly competitive society! All humanity will wallow in greed like the merchants of Ploroque. They will squabble, hate each other, and beat themselves down! Ha! My only desire is to make this entire world a hell of unending suffering for humanity, and I *will* succeed!”

He dripped with a horrifying level of malice. What could persuade someone to hate humanity this much?

“Your only goal is to make others suffer? That’s...awful,” I said.

“Ha ha, awful? I’m simply providing a catalyst. It will be you humans that drag yourselves down into hell! I’ll serve as your Judge of Avarice, nothing more! But first, you must die here!”

Grede leapt, closing the distance between us while his massive arms tried to smash me. I jumped up and landed on the back of one of his hands, then sliced through his shoulder with my sword.

“Gaaah!” He whipped his tail at me. “You’re capable, but don’t think a mere human can stand up to me! My hatred for your kind has intensified from the moment I was born, and I have continued to evolve to crush you! A minuscule human can’t possibly rival me!”

I caught his tail with my left hand. The impact sent cracks running through the floor beneath my feet. “Oof, That was a heavy hit.”

“What?! Impossible. You can’t...! How could you stop one of my attacks as though it were nothing?!” Grede put more strength into his tail. He was trying to crush me.

I was something completely abnormal to Grede. He refused to believe that I was a higher level than him. He couldn’t comprehend losing a simple battle of strength.

“D-dammit! How?!” He tried to pull his tail back, but I wouldn’t let him. I held tight and pulled on his tail with all my might. “Ah, aaah!!”

I tossed Grede’s body into the air. While he was suspended there, and therefore defenseless, I slashed him as hard as I could with my sword. Black liquid sprayed out, and his huge frame smashed into the ground, destroying the floor and sending him falling into the room below.

“Impossible!” he shouted. “I was created as a toy for humans...abused! I had everything taken from me! For so long I have lived only for revenge! You would deny me that? After all this time?!”

I dropped to the first floor. “Since you don’t recognize me, I’m guessing you’re not affiliated with the Unseen Hand of the Gods.” That wasn’t to say they weren’t involved somehow, though.

“How could I be defeated here?!” said Grede. “I...I fight with the used and abandoned remains of my kinsmen on my shoulders! I will not accept defeat!”

Grede’s gargantuan body bloated even more. Several tentacle-like appendages sprouted, each one with a huge hook-like talon on the end. New masks surfaced from inside his body in rapid succession as he morphed into something even more horrific.

“Gwa ha ha ha! I am ever evolving my knowledge and my body as necessary—humans cannot hope to compare! You won’t easily approach me! Shall we start the second round, Kanata?!”

“I’m sorry for the way you feel. But you’re not something that can exist in this world,” I said.

Grede shuddered with contempt. “Don’t think you’ve won yet, little boy!” he roared and rushed at me.

I knocked aside the hooks on his tentacles as I dodged back and forth, leaping from piles of rubble and off the walls to circle around him.

I had him outclassed, but I couldn't take a level 3,000 enemy lightly. Particularly dangerous were the countless tentacles that Grede manipulated individually, trying to ensnare me. If I let my guard down, he'd pin me and tear me apart.

"Ha ha ha! Not so tough now that you're on the defensive, eh?!" said Grede.

"Slow World." I pointed my sword at the advancing tentacles, and a large magic circle appeared. This was a level 12 space-time magic spell. It altered the laws of physics within its area, slowing down any object inside. The magic circle grew to fifteen feet across and turned into a sphere of purple light. All the tentacles inside crawled to a halt.

"A piddling trick!" shouted Grede. Tentacles flew at me from various other directions.

I jumped toward the tentacles that had stopped in Slow World. Since I'd slowed a portion of Grede's body, the sensation must have confused his actions. He was still focused on the tentacles I'd slowed down, which split his attention away from controlling the others effectively.

The slowly moving tentacles were like a blind spot for him. I hid behind them as I leapt from a wall while forming another magic circle.

"How'd you get up there?!" Grede reacted to me flying overhead a moment too late.

"Gravity Bomb." A shining darkness floated above Grede, contracting along with the space around it.

"No! Not like this!" Grede cried. He scrambled to scurry away from the black light. But gravity warped the space around him, refusing to let him escape.

His head burst.

Then his tentacles tore apart as his massive body fell over, taking a wall with it. Black liquid sprayed the area.

The Mechanical Moon clattered to the ground in front of Grede, its crystals

cracked. It looked like it'd been damaged by the explosion and torn from his body. Sunlight fell on the Mechanical Moon as its cog weakly tried to rotate, but it eventually ground to a halt.

– 4 –

“AHHH... I CAN'T... I can't...lose here...” groaned Grede, his arms moving feebly. It was obvious he was approaching his end.

“I don't know how you feel. And I don't know your convictions,” I said, “but dragging the whole world into hell because you suffered is just...heartless.”

“Heartless?! That's...that's...” Grede gnashed his teeth and groaned in a low voice. “That's something I know better than anyone.”

I gently lifted my sword. “...Rest in peace, now.”

“W-wait! Kanata!” came Philia's voice from the floor above. She was pulling a heavysset man with her by the hand. He looked to be one of Grede's subordinates.

“Wh-what the...? Lord Grede was hiding this horror in the mansion?” murmured the man, after looking down at Grede and gasping. “But...it's been defeated...? Wh-which means, the real monster is that man who killed it...”

It looked like Grede—Adam?—truly hadn't trusted anyone. He lived for so long in solitude, burning with resentment and rage.

Philia dashed down to stand in front of me, her arms spread wide to protect Grede. “K-Kanata... Um, Grede is just... Philia just feels bad for him... Sh-she'll keep an eye on him a-and tell him, ‘Don't do bad things!’ Please, just...”

I shook my head. “Grede made himself an enemy of the kingdom. Besides... we don't know how many people died because of him.”

He was the mastermind who intentionally enacted the malicious policies in Ploroque. He built up the black quarter and manipulated several criminal organizations. He wasn't even doing that to earn a profit, he was doing it to

make people miserable. There was no way to count how many people had fallen victim to Grede's wicked ways.

"And he's already dying," I said. He would perish there even if I didn't do anything.

Philia turned to look at Grede. I wasn't sure if he was still conscious. All he did was breathe painfully, his body heaving with each gasp. If we were truly thinking of his best interests, we would put him out of his misery rather than let him suffer.

"B-but, but..." said Philia.

"His hatred has gotten to a point that nothing will heal it. Let's let him rest in peace," I said.

Adam's goal was to keep humanity barely alive, forcing them to live in hatred and fear while constantly fighting with each other. He'd played his role as Grede, the Lord of Merchants, to achieve that goal. He'd done it for *decades*.

His hatred was all-consuming. I really didn't think he could ever live a happy life after this.

Part of Philia must have agreed with what I said, because she hung her head, then said, "Mister..." She faced him and gently stroked him above his massive mouth. His entire body shuddered in response.

"Ahhh!" With an agonized groan, Grede wrapped a huge arm around Philia.

"Philia-chan!" I cried, and my hand darted to the hilt of my sword.

"Th-there you are...Eve! Grede never kept his promise... I thought...I thought he'd killed you! I've wanted to see you for so long. It's been so long."

Who was Eve? It looked like he mistook Philia for someone else. She was a bit taken aback, but she hugged him gently.

"Now, look. Outside...it's just over there... The light! You always wanted to see it... You never got to come above ground... The light...the *sky*! Let's go play together! I feel like...I've been in a long nightmare... But now we have all the time in the world!"

"Yeah..." said Philia quietly.

“Today...today is a good day...”

With those last words, Grede fell motionless.

“...Goodbye, Mister.”

– 5 –

“**I** BET THERE ARE SOME of Grede’s golems left in the city. We need to go,” I said to Philia, who hadn’t moved. Her arms stayed tightly wrapped around Grede.



“Yeah,” she said, then she gently stroked his head one last time and stepped away from his body.

Suddenly, I heard someone clapping their hands inside the mansion. I looked up and saw a man standing there.

“Incredible. Kanata Kanbara, in the flesh! You’ve been quite the pain in the neck to the higher beings.” His face was hidden behind a round mask, and he wore a crown on his head. He held a large, glittering gold staff.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Veranta, true ruler of Locklore and the leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods. You captured Ramiel, forced Sophia to flee with her tail between her legs...and now you’ve trounced Adam, my greatest masterpiece, without breaking a sweat.”

“The leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods...?” One of my greatest enemies came here personally. But hang on... “Adam was *your* greatest masterpiece?” Adam was Grede’s real name according to his status.

“Are you the real Grede? The one that made him?” asked Philia. She seemed to know something about the situation that I didn’t.

“I am not,” said Veranta. “Adam was created using Omnipotent Alchemy, my Gift Skill. I slipped in among the real Grede’s workers and assisted in Adam’s creation.”

“What?!”

“In fact, I originally intended to make Adam a humanoid dragon of around level 500. At that level he lacked the necessary power to oppose you, so I slipped back in to arrange things so Grede’s men stumbled upon the method for producing a Mechanical Moon. *That* is my masterpiece. Grede could never have created that, no matter how much time and money he threw into the project.”

“You!” I drew my sword without thinking and pointed it at Veranta.

“Y-you did this...?” asked Philia.

Veranta looked down at her and said, “Yes, I did. In fact, it was the Unseen Hand of the Gods who paved the way for the emergence of the Lord of

Merchants in the first place, who enabled him to gain enough power to rival the kingdom. To add some color to this world, we simply elevated a poor, greedy merchant. A traveling sage gave him a push in the right direction, and we pulled the strings from there.”

“So...Grede’s...or Adam’s hatred...” I said. I thought Adam was so tormented by his pent-up anger and sorrow that he’d hatched this plan on his own. But what Veranta said flipped that all on its head. All of it was a scheme of the Unseen Hand of the Gods.

“We left a certain amount of his story to chance, but it generally went as we planned. We sowed the seeds of his hatred, and our meticulous plan bore fruit.”

Philia glared at Veranta with eyes red and puffy from crying. I’d never seen her show such powerful emotion. She held her hand up toward Veranta and squeezed her fist. A huge white arm with a red pattern materialized and tried to squash him.

“Deploy,” he said, and countless swords and spears instantly appeared around him. They pierced the arm that Philia made, skewering it to the floor. “I did not come to fight—I would stand no chance against you if I did. No. I came to warn you.”

“Warn me...?” I asked.

“We—the Unseen Hand of the Gods—protect the rules of this world. We work tirelessly to grant the world verve and intrigue, as required by the plan. Do you know why we do that?”

“Probably because you’re the higher beings’ pawns, and you step on and toy with the dignity of every creature that lives in this world.”

“Correct. But that is the means, not the end. I haven’t come here and revealed everything in my hand to provoke you.”

“Okay, then, why are you here?”

“Because if the higher beings lose interest in this world...they will *erase* it.”

I felt the blood drain from my face when he said that. “They can’t toss it aside

because they got bored, that's just..."

"The higher beings have invested an incredible amount of resources into creating and maintaining Locklore. There have already been several similar worlds—each one deleted after the Gods became bored. Do you understand, Kanata Kanbara? Yes, *we* create tragedy. But *you* trample on the delicately laid foundation of the world, hastening its demise. Or did you fancy yourself some sort of hero fighting against the higher beings' expectations?"

I couldn't answer. Veranta and I glared at each other during the moment of silence, then I said, "What's the point of telling me? Are you telling me to hurry up and die for the sake of the world?"

"If you did, it would make things much simpler. But no, I only wanted to talk. As I said earlier, I did not come to fight. I told you Adam was my greatest masterpiece, didn't I? Now you know the limit of what I'm capable of producing, even with access to the Lord of Merchant's incredible wealth. Ramiel, Sophia, and I have all already failed. Though, Sophia...hm, you may not be aware of her."

I was all too familiar with Ramiel, but who was Sophia? What else was going on?

"You're nearly level 5,000. That is inconceivable," continued Veranta. "But even so, you stand no chance against Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven. That's a relief for me. I won't have to use the Silent Void."

Nobunaga. Ramiel had talked about him. She said he had a terrible personality that wasn't suited to being in the Unseen Hand of the Gods and that she would tell me about him if I fulfilled her conditions.

"Farewell then, Kanata Kanbara. The end is quickly approaching. I will use my own means to protect Locklore, the world I love. And you may struggle desperately for yourself and the people around you," said Veranta as he turned and started walking away. A huge mirror in a carved gilt frame appeared, and he passed through its surface. Then he and the mirror disappeared; he had teleported away.

IT WAS A WEEK after Grede's—er, Adam's—rebellion failed. The royal knights stationed themselves in Ploroque to take care of the remaining golem hordes and the criminals in the black quarter.

They were pretty busy, and Bennet kept coming by to say ridiculous things like, “Kanataaa, we’re friends, right? Help me out, and I’ll take the credit.” I kept turning him down.

Grede & Co. was in a state of internal chaos as people came out of the woodwork to fight over who would take Grede’s place. Isabella quickly emerged as the sole victor.

Isabella predicted in advance that Ploroque would lose its local lord and fall into chaos, so she’d already cozied up to the royal knights in anticipation. They acknowledged her as a provisional leader of the area to help get things under control. They knew only someone knowledgeable about commerce could lead the city.

“The Lord of Merchants...I always knew that guy was fishy, but I never thought he’d try something like this. You got here at a terrible time, Mel. Doubt things are going to be good for The Pixie’s Wingbeats for a while,” said Rosemonde with a sigh in the back of the shop.

“No, no, I’m actually super lucky!” said Mel. “The whole mess made the royal knights notice the details in Grede & Co.’s contracts. They’re saying certain things are illegal and considering revising them. That means my contract might get reviewed! I could get a lot of money back!”

She sounded in high spirits as she patted Philia’s head, who was sitting on her lap. “Hee hee! In the end, I might score some prime real estate in Ploroque for dirt cheap! And I’m working directly under Isabella, who got a huge promotion! This shop’s getting bigger and bigger from here on out! Thank you all so much! Seriously!”

“Well...I don’t really understand the details, but I’m glad things have

improved,” I said.

“It’s mostly all because of you, Kanata! Thank you, again! And Isabella said she’s going to give me some money for the shop, and it’s so much that I don’t even understand the unit of measurement! I told you I’d give you 99.9 percent of all profits, so I’ll make sure you get your share!”

“No, thank you.”

“Mel, that’s an investment, not profit...” said Pomera uneasily.

This all sounded prosperous, but I was in no state to handle financial discussions. Adam said he built up Ploroque to expose humans’ true nature: greed. It felt like we’d played into Adam’s trap in some way, and we were still playing by the rules he put in place. I found it hard to be happy when I thought of it that way.

“Hee hee, now the products I designed are going to spread throughout the world!” said Mel. “It’s kind of...I don’t know...amazing! I just think about how all the products I send out into the world will make so many people happy! Hee hee! But that’s what making things is all about, I guess!”

I smiled slightly as I listened to Mel.

“Ah! Kanata’s smiling again! He’s thinking, ‘What’s this happy-go-lucky girl ranting about?!’” Mel pointed at me and waved her arms.

“No, no...I do think it’s amazing. I was just thinking I’m glad it’s someone like you I started working with,” I said.

“Hee hee... I think that was a compliment.”

The only reason Grede ended up with the ideas he had was because of interference by the Unseen Hand of the Gods—specifically by Veranta, the Ruler of the World.

And the only people who flocked to the Lord of Merchants were people like Wantz...which probably didn’t help. Maybe Grede wanted people he could hate, so he subconsciously gathered the worst possible people around him, convincing himself that all humans were the same.

“But humans and the world...they aren’t as bad as you thought they were,” I

murmured, staring out the window.

Even if Grede did handpick the worst dregs of humanity to be around him as a target for his hatred...there was a more natural target for his hate.

Adam never should have been allowed to exist in the first place. He was so submerged in his hate that he sent many people to the depths of despair, and in the end, even tried to start a war for his own selfish reasons.

And now I felt like it was time to get a little revenge on the Unseen Hand.

“Rosemonde-san...you’ll come with us to the Garden of the Dragons now, right?” I asked.

“I made a promise, kid. You kept your side of the bargain, and now I owe you. I will drag some clues out of that girl if it’s the last thing I do,” declared Rosemonde with a snap of her fingers.

“That sounds dangerous, Rosemonde-san,” said Mel. “What if you stayed here? You would help me so much...”

“My mind is made up. That’s how it goes. And the only reason I helped was because it didn’t feel right leaving you where you were. Besides, this is no big deal, right? I’m gonna have a little chat with a powerful evildoer who tried to destroy the balance of the world—it’ll be a cinch.”

“A-aren’t you nice?! Um, uh, Kanata, are you sure everything is going to be okay?” Mel looked at me uneasily.

Rosemonde had read a lot into Ramiel’s request, apparently assuming that Ramiel had some hidden motive. It was true that Ramiel was still a member of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, even if she was held captive. But it probably hadn’t even crossed her mind that the reason behind Ramiel’s request was more like “I’m bored and lonely, so bring me that lady who was really nice to me.”

The sound of footsteps approached from outside.

“A customer? But the shop’s closed right now...” said Mel in confusion.

“Hey! Is the shop owner here? We need your cooperation with the royal knights. Oh...it’s you, Kanata!” The newcomer’s tone changed from demanding

to polite the instant he saw me.

“Oh...it’s you,” I said in return. I was just thinking it sounded like we might have an annoying man on our hands, and the newcomer turned out to be Bennet-san. Which meant we *definitely* had an annoying man on our hands. “I already turned down your invitation to the knights and your request for assistance—”

“This is about something else,” said Bennet. “There’s something we need help with from the residents of Ploroque, so I’m going around to places where people might gather.” He had rolled-up papers in his hand.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Wanted posters. Influential figures in the black quarter and Grede’s former subordinates are trying to flee. I want you to hang these up inside and outside the shop.”

“I’ll gladly cooperate with that,” said Mel generously as she took the papers from Bennet. “Oh...*him*...” She stopped and blinked when she saw the poster on top.

“Is it someone you know?” I asked, peering at the wanted posters in her hands too. I recognized that shady smile. “Wantz...”

“He was formerly the second most powerful person in Grede & Co., and apparently pretty close with Grede himself,” explained Bennet. “It’s highly likely he had a hand in Grede’s plans.”

As I listened to Bennet, I thought back to how Wantz acted during the chaos in Ploroque:

“That’s why I’m running away! I might end up squished by a golem, and the royal knights think I’m in on this with Lord Grede! It’d be one thing if they were to take me in for questioning...but it’s equally likely that they’ll cut me down on the spot! I knew Lord Grede was going senile and doing dubious things, but I never even imagined he’d cook up something as big as this! I swear I didn’t know anything about it!”

I really didn’t think that was an act. “...I wonder. He’s not really that involved, I don’t think. And if we just left him...”

“Even if he really isn’t involved in Grede’s attack, there’s suspicion he regularly used his position to commit acts of fraud, property theft, price gouging, and criminal threats. We have to catch this guy no matter what,” said Bennet.

“Well...yeah, I guess he did do that...” I said. I vaguely considered defending Wantz since I had given him advice on what to do, but hearing all that made it clear he was an indefensible lowlife. There was no good reason not to arrest him.

“We’ve got evidence that he’s still going about committing acts of petty fraud and thievery,” continued Bennet.

I felt my entire body go limp when I heard that. “H-he’s that desperate? Why would someone who used to be at the top of Grede & Co. bother with that kind of thing?”

“Through our cooperation with former Grede & Co. member, Isabella, we’ve seized all his assets. He’s got to be having a hard time financially.”

So, he’d lost his fortune built from ill-gotten gains? I guess you could call that payback...

During the chaos of the attack, Wantz seemed to regret his lifestyle so much he’d rather die than go back, but it turned out that old habits were hard to break.

Bonus Story:

The End of the City of Greed

– 1 –

AFTER GREDE’S attempted revolt, Mel invited us to a victory party to celebrate the success of The Pixie’s Wingbeats. I figured it would be a private party with just us, so I went to the restaurant without thinking much about it. But when we got there, a crowd of prosperous and influential merchants had already gathered.

Mel chatted happily to the merchants around her, while Rosemonde was beside her, sitting in a chair and looking unapproachable. She seemed to be aware that she stuck out like a sore thumb.

“She looks so awkward...” I murmured a little too loudly.

“What did you just say?” she snapped.

“U-uh, nothing.”

“Aaah! You’re all here, Kanata! Come here, come here!” said Mel happily as she waved us over.

“O-okay, coming...”

Rosemonde wasn’t the only one who felt out of place. And she probably had more experience with situations like this, since she’d worked as an A-rank adventurer for a long time. To be honest...I wished Mel had organized a smaller, cozier event.

I sat down and ate the food I was served. I knew this was a popular place that all the important merchants came to, but I was so nervous, I couldn’t enjoy the meal. A lot of the other merchants tried talking to me—it seemed they knew me as the person Mel owed and someone who helped defeat the golems—but the best I could offer was a friendly smile.

“*Seriously*, Kanata, you guys have done so much for me!” said Mel. “You too, Philia! Thank you! I’m going to be putting the teddy bear cup you suggested in the shop! I’ve already got them made, so I’ll give you one as a present later!”

“Really? Philia’s so happy!” said Philia as she squirmed with joy in Mel’s lap. At least she didn’t seem uncomfortable given the situation.

“Miss, you really are drinking quite a lot,” I heard someone say.

My head snapped around to look in the direction the ominous words were coming from. I saw a drunk Pomera, her face red as she had the waiter pour alcohol into a row of cups.

“Don’t judge me by my appearance. Adventurers can hold their alcohol,” slurred Pomera.

“Pomera-san, I thought you stopped drinking,” I scolded, covering my face with my hands. She must have caved to her nerves and started drinking to escape the awkwardness of the party.

“Is Pomera not good at drinking?” asked Mel.

“Oh, no...she’s so good at it that she can drink an alcohol-loving dragonkin under the table.” In my mind was an image of Raigan, his face in a bucket after challenging Pomera to a drinking contest.

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem, right?” said Mel. “Why are you so worried?”

“W-well. It’s *not* a problem...yet.” If she looked liable to do something, then I’d grab her and leave as fast as I could.

“Oh, by the way, Kanata! I’m going to be putting up that mithril statue in a square in Ploroque like I promised!” said Mel.

“Mithril statue...?” I looked away from Pomera. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you forget? Come on, I said if I survived, I’d put a mithril statue of you up in the middle of Ploroque. Don’t you remember?”

I collapsed forward and hit my head on the table.

“Ah ha! I’m a woman of my word, after all!” she continued. “And mithril’s a

magic metal that doesn't corrode. The statue'll be there for centuries! Millennia! Long after the kingdom has disappeared, Kanata's heroic form will still be here!"

This is a nightmare. I might run into people down the line who recognize me as the mysterious mithril statue in Ploroque...

"Once I said I owed you, all sorts of people showed up to help out! You're the big hero who saved the city! No one was against the idea! Even so, it was a bit tough to get people to agree on putting it smack-dab in the middle of the city... but I made it happen! I worked really hard!"

"I'm really sorry, because you did put so much effort into this, but...would you be able to cancel the project?"

"What? Whaaat?!" Mel reeled backward in shock.

I couldn't help but ask. I really couldn't stand the idea of a mithril statue of me surviving for over a millennium.

Someone chose that moment to come and cling onto my left shoulder. "It'sss fiiiine, Kanata. You should accept people's gener...genroshty!"

Agh, why is she over here?

"P-Pomera-san?!" I cried. I looked over to the merchants she'd been talking to. All of them had collapsed in a drunken stupor. She was the last drunk standing.

"Kanataaaa...I know...I know you thought it was a liiittle bit funny that people started calling me 'Holy Fist Pomera,'" she whispered in my ear.

"No! Y-you're mistaken!" I said, furiously shaking my head.

"Mel, you work haaard! I support you!" said Pomera.

"Leave it to me, Pomera! I'm going to make his statue super cool!" Mel stood up and shook hands with Pomera. I let out a heavy sigh and cradled my head in my hands.



“Oooh, by the way, Kanataaa, I’ve always wanted to ask you...who’s Lunaère?” asked Pomera, her voice chilly. Her hand gripped my shoulder like a vice.

“Uh...I already told you. She taught me magic and how to fight.”

“But why’d you...why’d you lie about her age? She was obviously not an old lady when I met her.”

“I-it’s complicated, I can’t go around talking about it,” I said.

I had once told her Lunaère was an old woman to hide her identity as a lich, but then Pomera actually met her during the Red Staff of Authority incident in Manaloch. It seemed like she was holding a grudge about it.

Liches weren’t allowed to exist under kingdom law. I managed to keep the secret thus far, but Pomera was obviously suspicious. And while I hoped Pomera would keep Lunaère’s secret, I still worried. It was a question of whether or not I could keep the truth hidden from Pomera when she was drunk and not holding back.

“Oooh, is this gossip? I wanna hear!” said Mel, leaning in close to us.

“Lissen to this, Mel!” said Pomera. “Kanata treated his sweetheart like an old lady to hide her! Isn’t that *awful*?!”

“That’s not what happened!” I cried as the conversation went in a terrible direction.

“Kanata has a sweetheart?! Relationship gossip is the best! Tell me everything!” demanded Mel with fascination.

“Philia too! Philia wants to hear!”

This was the worst possible girls’ chat ever. I cradled my head in my hands, wondering how to escape, when someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around to see the current head of Grede & Co., Isabella.

“Looks like you’re all enjoying the party. I’m glad I had Mel invite you,” she said.

“I-I’m sorry, everyone’s so...lively...” I replied.

“I wanted to discuss something with you. Would you mind coming over here?” Isabella gestured for me to follow.

I glanced at Pomera and the others. The three of them were getting worked up talking about me.

“...Perfect timing actually. I’m uncomfortable here,” I said as I followed her and took a seat a little ways off from the group.

“I guessed as much.” Isabella gave an amused smile.

“Congratulations on moving up to being the new head of the company,” I said. “Guess you’ll also become the lord in Grede’s place, right?”

“Thank you. Though, it does seem the kingdom is reluctant to grant any single merchant too much authority after Grede’s revolt and all the laws he created for his benefit. A neighboring noble is set to be made lord, and I’ll...I’ll end up as a mere magistrate.”

“Oh...”

“To be honest, I have enough on my plate already with the faction wars within the company. But the most dangerous problem is the criminal organizations that Grede was so close to. Now they’re running unchecked.”

“Unchecked...?”

“Thanks to you and the royal knights, the revolt quickly ended in failure when Grede disappeared. But Grede left magic weapons in the care of criminal organizations in the black quarter. The criminals holding on to the weapons will eventually find themselves under the royal knight’s investigations...and if they’re going to get arrested anyway, they’re likely to make last-ditch efforts to fight back. This is a dangerous situation—one wrong step and the city could turn into a large-scale battlefield. It’s like a huge bomb we can’t disarm. The royal knights are struggling with them.”

“The situation’s that bad?” Nothing could ever be easy.

“There’s one armed group...the Blue Skull. Their leader is Galatia. You could say he’s the face of the hidden side of Ploroque. All the other criminals are scattered, with no options but to flee Ploroque, but he’s still standing. And I

have a vague idea where he might be.”

“You want me to take care of him?”

“It’s not like I have no connections in the black quarter. It’s necessary as a merchant working in this city...for protection, among other things. Things are changing now that Grede has disappeared, however, and many merchants refuse to adapt. If it goes public that I sold out Galatia, it might draw resistance from the old guard. I can’t publicly ask for assistance, but will you accept my request? I’ll provide payment under another name. Galatia is a dangerous man...but I know you and your friends are even more dangerous.”

“Was asking me to do this your goal all along?”

“Interpersonal connections are the foundation of profit. A shared meal is a golden opportunity for a merchant. We don’t leave empty seats in a banquet.” Her smile was radiant.

“Some golden opportunity,” I murmured. I couldn’t help glancing over at the merchants Pomera drank into a stupor.

“Ah. An oversight on my part,” said Isabella. She closed her eyes and cleared her throat with a hint of embarrassment.

“Okay,” I said. “I don’t feel right leaving something that could cause trouble later down the line. I’ll capture Galatia and turn him in to the royal knights.”

– 2 –

THE NEXT DAY, Pomera, Philia, and I went walking deep into the black quarter.

“This is bad. The place that was supposed to be their hideout is already an empty husk,” I said with a sigh. The warehouse Isabella had indicated was cleaned out of magic weapons. The Blue Skull group was gone.

“What do we do, Kanata?” asked Pomera.

“All we can do is report this to Isabella... She probably can’t even get a quick read of where they went. I don’t want to go back on my word, but I don’t see

where we can go from here.”

We had our own fight with the Unseen Hand of the Gods to attend to, meaning we had to get back to the Garden of the Dragons. I felt bad about abandoning this request, but our only real choice was to step away.

“Psst. You three. You’re searching for something important,” came a suspicious-sounding voice from a figure sitting on the side of the road. His entire body was hidden under a cloth.

“And you are...?” I asked. He had a large crystal in his hands.

“Just a traveling fortune teller. There are many lost people here. Do you know of the Prophet Rukh?”

“Who’s that?” I’d never heard the name before.

“Oh...I’ve heard of her!” chirped Pomera. “She’s a legendary diviner who predicted a demon king disaster before it happened!”

“I am her disciple. I could have all the wealth and fame I desired if I used my abilities for profit, but I work to carry on her legacy of guiding those who cannot be saved.”

“Rukh’s disciple?” I felt like we’d run into someone really important.

“You three seem different from the residents of this city. I feel an immense aura from you. You are fated to achieve great things. I hope to assist you with this.”

“Okaaay...” I was destined to fight against the Unseen Hand of the Gods, the people who rule this world. Maybe he instinctively felt that.

“For a small donation of only fifteen gold, I will find the path you should take and point you down it.”

“Hmm...” That was more expensive than I was expecting. I couldn’t help feeling it was a high price for a disciple who didn’t care for wealth or fame.

“Look, it’s not as if I want money,” said the man, “But I require a small stipend if I wish to continue my journey. And many poor people live in this area. I cannot proceed with my work if people such as yourselves don’t provide me with support. This is not for me...you are contributing to the people of the

world.”

“Fine.” Consider me convinced. It all made sense. “I’m sorry for doubting you.”

“There is no need to apologize. Now, if you would be so kind as to donate—”

“Um...Kanata? I feel like I know this—” started Pomera.

“D-did you say Kanata?!” said Rukh’s disciple as his whole body jolted. He peered at me from a gap in the fluttering cloth, affording me a good look at his face. I *did* know this person.

“Wantz-san...?! What are you doing here?”

The jig was up for the former member of Grede & Co.

“Tsk!” Wantz threw the cloth at us as a distraction and dashed in the opposite direction.

I immediately swiped the cloth aside with one hand and grabbed at Wantz’s back with the other, dragging him to the ground.

“Gah!”

“...You’ve really changed,” I deadpanned. “I can’t believe you’ve become Rukh’s disciple, mastered divination, and started a journey to help people in just these past few days.”

“Dammit! Why are you people here?!” cried Wantz.

So he really had been hiding in the black quarter and performing petty scams to make money. This was just another con.

“Didn’t you say you regretted your actions and had a change of heart?” I asked.

“Yes! I *do* regret them! I lost everything, and I realized that making dirty money won’t get me the things that are important as a person!”

“Then why—”

“I still need to live! I have no cash, and the royal knights are chasing me all over... How else am I supposed to eat?!”

“Uh huh,” I said, feeling pathetic for being taken in by his lies, if even for a moment.

“What should we do?” asked Pomera. “We’d better turn him in to the royal knights, right?”

“Maybe...” I doubted there was any real need to capture someone as small-time as him, but we were about to leave the black quarter anyway. Might as well bring him in.

“W-wait! You’re treating me like I colluded with Grede’s revolt even though I didn’t help at all! If you take me in, they’ll convict me of false charges! I’ll get landed with a harsh sentence!”

“I’ll tell them you weren’t involved with it. But I heard that even before that you were scamming people, threatening them, giving orders, and all sorts of stuff.”

Wantz’s face turned white. “Oh... H-hang on! You three came here for a purpose, right? Maybe we can negotiate. The black quarter is like my backyard! There’s nothing I don’t know about it!”

“Meaning that if you show us the way, maybe...” My hand covered my mouth as I thought.

“Kanata, can we really trust him?” asked Pomera. “He never even realized what evil things Grede was up to! He’s trying to hoodwink us so he can look for his chance to run away.”

Wantz jumped like Pomera had struck a bullseye shot on him. “Ha...ha ha ha... I-I wouldn’t do that. It’s true, Lord Grede did a good job hiding the revolt from me. But to be fair, he put on the same ruse for *everyone*! We all saw him as an eccentric old man! I’ve heard he used some fairly ruthless methods to keep his secret utterly secure. He really was a mystery.”

“Well...” I said. “We want to go see a man named Galatia. Can you show us the way?”

“G-Galatia?!” His face went white.

“Can we trust this man *at all*?” pleaded Pomera again.

“It’s not like we’re trusting him,” I said. “We’re having him come along until we find Galatia. If he doesn’t help, we’ll hand him over to the royal knights.”

“...You’re taking me to Galatia?! You must be joking!” Wantz trembled. “Galatia is an incredibly dangerous fellow! If someone makes an enemy of him, he’ll kill that person, their family, their kids, *even* people they were barely acquainted with! What reason could you possibly have to go and see him?!”

“Well...we were going to capture him and hand him over to the royal knights,” I said.

“Are you insane?! I will *not* be a part of that! I don’t know what your end goal is, but you really should walk away!”

“I helped stop Grede, and I won’t leave a job half finished.”

“So you’re picking a fight with Galatia because you’ve got a strong work ethic?!” Wantz floundered. “Look, I do have an idea where his hideout is. There’s a region of the black quarter where the situation changed. He’s probably in there somewhere. I bet I could find him quickly if I identified places that have the necessary requirements for his hideout. I’ll give you all the information you want, but I will *not* go there with you! Absolutely not!” His voice rose into a shriek.

“Well, I don’t have any other choice if you won’t change your mind,” I said with a sigh.

“I won’t! I absolutely will not go to Galatia!”

“All right, let’s go hand you over to the royal knights.”

Wantz clamped his mouth shut. Then he muttered, “I...I could help you search for the location.”

“No, you’re too good with words. If you’re looking for a chance to run, I’ll have to take you back.”

Wantz crouched to the ground and buried his head in his hands. He looked the picture of dejection. “My perfect life crumbled around me the minute I signed a contract with that girl...”

I patted his shoulder. “Yes. Evil deeds always come back to haunt us.”

“That’s rich coming from the person who brought everything crashing down! You did this!” Wantz waved his arms and pointed at me.

“Technically, if we’re talking about who’s responsible for destroying the city, that’d be Grede...” I said. “All right, what do you want to do? Galatia or the royal knights?”

“...”

It took quite some time for Wantz to make his decision.

– 3 –

TWO HOURS LATER, we broke into the Blue Skull’s underground hideout.

“Gaaah! Do you know who you’re picking a fight with?!”

The dog spirit Wolzottl rushed around to the background noise of agonized screams.

“Awooooo!” he howled. He picked up Blue Skull members in his mouth, tossing and tackling them and sending them flying. He generally did whatever he wanted—he was over level 2,000, and nobody there could stop him.

“I have nothing to do with this, nothing at all, I’m not involved...” shouted Wantz, shrinking behind me, his body trembling.

“Hey! You’re Wantz, yeah?! Don’t think you can get away with this!” shouted one of the criminals as they ran away.

“N-no, you’ve mistaken me for someone else!”

“A weaselly answer like that confirms it! We’ll get you for this!”

“Why meee?! I’m the least involved!” shrieked Wantz.

“Awooooo!” Wolzottl came back to me after finishing them off, and I scratched him under his chin. He closed his eyes in pleasure and let out a whine.

“Wantz-san, do you want to pet him too?” I asked.

“No! Can I go now?! I’m not involved with this!”

“There’s a chance Galatia already ran. If that’s the case, I’ll need you to help us look for the next possible location.”

“I can’t take this! What did I do to deserve such a task?!” he said as he furiously scrubbed his hands through his hair.

“You reap what you sow,” I said. “This is what happens when you engage in immoral business.”

“*You’re* the one who dragged me into this! And anyway, this...spirit, he’s definitely a pretty high level, but it’s still insane to take on the Blue Skull with so few people! We should run now!”

“Hey, I’m more than double Wol’s level.”

“What...?” Wantz’s eyes grew wide.

“We’ll be fine. Come, let’s keep going.” I walked forward.

“Exactly who did I get on the wrong side of, here...?” Wantz stood frozen, cowering.

“Hurry, please.”

“U-uh...indeed...” He followed me timidly.

“Why are you lagging so far behind?” I asked.

He hesitated. “So you don’t hit me in the face on accident when you turn around.”

“I don’t hit that hard unless I mean to,” I sighed.

After rampaging mercilessly through the Blue Skull’s hideout, we eventually found our way to Galatia.

“Who the devil are you lot? You’ve done a superlative job of destroying my garden,” he said. He was a creepy-looking man with a long, bald head. He had a weird beard that only grew around the edges of his mouth, and he sat in a disturbing chair decorated with skull-shaped ornaments.

“You’re Galatia?” I asked. “I can tell because of your interesting appearance.”

“Hmph, what a crude attempt to rile me up. And...Wantz. You’ve betrayed the people of the dark society, eh? You were only ever good at calculating profit and loss. You’ve changed since Grede was captured.”

“Y-y-you’ve misunderstood, Galatia...sir! I just...um...these people, they threatened me!” Wantz made flailing gestures, trying to talk his way out of the situation.

“Wantz-san reported you because he has a strong sense of justice,” I said. “He said nothing would change for the better as long as you remained at large.”

“I certainly did *not*!” Wantz stared at me, his mouth gaping wide. “Kanataaa!”

“Sorry, I wanted to put in a good word for you.”

“By destroying my life?!”

“It’s fine. I’ll make sure to capture Galatia.”

“Please, I’m begging you!” He pounded the wall with a furious fist.

“Kanata, you’re kind of mean to bad guys. I don’t know if that’s a good or a bad thing,” said Pomera with a weak smile.

“Nothing would change...?” asked Galatia. “Hmph, that’s a bold thing to say. It’s not possible to destroy the darkness—light and darkness are two sides of the same coin. Everyone is safer if someone like me has the authority to bring the agents of darkness together and keep it under control. You outsiders know nothing.”

“Even if that were true, the magic weapons Grede gave you are too powerful for you,” I said, and Galatia grinned.

“You came all the way here knowing about those? Fools. The power Grede used in his revolt was just the tip of the iceberg. He only kept what he needed to kick aside the royal knights in his mansion. What I have is real military might...the power to destroy kingdoms!”

“Y-you have a weapon capable of destroying the kingdom here?!” Wantz looked at Galatia with despair.

“Grede only failed because he was defeated too quickly. The massive golem that sleeps here is the real power meant to destroy the kingdom. It is the true symbol of Grede’s ambition and desires! It used to require his magic signature to activate, but my people modified it. Now I am capable of commanding it!”

It sounded like Galatia had already broken the safety on this golem. A magic signature was kind of like a magical fingerprint. Every living thing’s magic was unique and could be used to verify an individual.

Maybe he’d been planning on betraying Grede all along, or maybe he was hoping to use it to negotiate with Grede while on equal footing.

“Come, Goliath, giant of magical mechanisms!” Galatia raised his hands up to the ceiling, and the wall behind him crumbled. A massive, fifteen-foot-tall golem appeared.

“Grooooah!”

“Ha ha ha ha! This is the spirit of destruction, the S-rank adventurer killer! Grede created it to take on the entire kingdom! No mere human can stand against it!” Galatia shrieked with laughter.

“He... Adam wasn’t his most powerful weapon?!” I cried. I’d let my guard down. I never imagined I would find a monster that outranked Adam in Ploroque.

“This is no good! You owe me an apology! You dragged me all the way here saying you’d make sure I was safe!” screeched Wantz as he looked at me with wild eyes.

GOLIATH

Race: Mega Golem

Lv: 455

HP: 2502/2502

MP: 2111/2111

“Huh? That’s...all?” I said and cocked my head. I mean, it was fairly strong... but it was way weaker than Mother, the spider demon king. And Alice, a relatively powerful humanoid dragon, for that matter. “I guess it’s a solid 2.5 Lovises.”

Thinking about it, Grede wouldn’t have told Galatia about his true nature. And Grede gave Galatia Goliath. Of course Galatia would think it was Grede’s most powerful weapon.

Besides, if Galatia knew about Adam, he wouldn’t have called Goliath, “the symbol of Grede’s ambition and desires.” Adam’s plan was driven by hate, not desire. Adam loathed greed more than anyone.

“G-Goliath...why aren’t you listening to my commands? Your enemy is that way! Hey!” said Galatia.

“Verification error... Verification error... A forbidden process has been detected. Entering rampage mode,” boomed Goliath.

Ah. They’d broken the magic signature lock but hadn’t actually tried activating Goliath. Maybe they were saving it for when they were backed into a corner.

“Stop! Goliath! Stop!” shouted Galatia desperately.

“I’ve seen this in a manga before,” I said. It was the trope where a mad scientist is destroyed by their uncontrollable creation. I never thought I’d see it happen in real life. It was kind of moving.

“Th-this isn’t the time for talk, Kanata! That thing’s going to come after us once it beats Galatia!” cried Pomera.

“Wol, do you mind?” I asked.

“Awoooo!” Wolzottl leapt at the golem, toppling it and shattering one of its arms on impact.

“Damage... Damage... Integrity at 15 percent... Limits removed... Now entering Berserk Mode...” Goliath announced.

It tried to get back to its feet, but Wolzottl stepped on it. The wolf spirit held it down and attacked its head with his fangs. Goliath’s entire body shuddered violently, then...stopped altogether.

“Eek! Aaah! Grede...! Did you not trust me?! How could this happen?!” wailed Galatia.

“Galatia-san, it’s over,” I said.

“Huh?” Galatia was sprawled on the ground in a trembling mess, arms curled protectively around his head. He finally looked up when I called to him. His mouth hung open in disbelief as he stared at the pitiful remains of Goliath. “What the...? Aaah, this is impossible! That’s the weapon Grede made to destroy the kingdom! How could something this ridiculous happen?! I-it took less than five people to defeat it!”

“Are there any other weapons I should know about?” I asked, and Galatia turned fearfully toward me. He threw himself to his knees and pressed his head to the floor.

“I-I surrender! I surrender!”

It seemed like the fight with Galatia had wrapped up.

“Now we’ve gotta hand him off to the royal knights,” I said. “Wantz-san, thanks for showing us the way... Wantz-san?” I looked around. “Uh...? Pomera-san, where’s Wantz-san?”

“U-um, he’s gone... I only took my eyes off him for a second.”

“Philia wasn’t looking either. Sorry.”

“Woof,” Wolzottl huffed, looking apologetic.

“He must have decided we were at a disadvantage and ran when we were all focused on Goliath.”

There wasn’t a single person in this world who lived a less honest life than that man. Even after losing every penny he had, he’d chosen to keep relying on scams and dine-and-dashes.

“I was even planning on letting him go this time...” I said with an awkward smile as I scanned the area. A surprising number of roads lead away from here. Searching for him now would be useless.

“**H**UFF, HUFF... Nothing goes well when Kanata’s involved... Now Galatia and his bunch have it out for me... It’s the end...” Wantz quickly pulled some cloth over his head to hide his face as he hobbled down the streets of the black quarter. “I’ve got to get out of here, no matter what. I feel like I’m getting good at this fortune teller shtick. People won’t be that suspicious of me if I keep my face hidden while I’m dressed up... Maybe I should get a wagon...”

Wantz mumbled suggestions to himself as he walked, and then he heard someone.

“Hey... You!” It was a sudden call from a man on the side of the road.

“Wh-what?! I’m not Wantz!” Though he’d just introduced himself, he pulled on his cloth, making sure that his face was hidden.

“You... You’re Rukh’s disciple, aren’t you?” said the exhausted, red-headed man. He wore a black, dingy coat.

His arms were thick and muscular, but his eyes were sunken in and his cheeks hollow.

You see people like this in the black quarter all the time... thought Wantz, observing the man and shifting into fortune teller mode. Proud of his physical strength, but he ended up a criminal and ran here to escape. But he probably can’t accept that truth. He doesn’t have a weapon on him now, but I’m guessing he uses a large hammer or sword based on the calluses on his hands. If a mercenary is without their weapon in a place like this, then something must be going on...

His talent as a merchant was still serving him well—he wasn’t going to let an opportunity for a sale pass by.

“Yees... I am indeed Rukh’s disciple,” crooned Wantz. “You have experienced a great misfortune and are now struggling to decide how you should live. You feel a great anxiety about whether or not you can even choose your own path.”

“You really...do know everything...!”

Wantz nearly snorted with laughter but managed to control himself. “Yes, I see all.” *Now I just need to supplement with vague words that could apply to anyone.*

Just as he thought that, a different thought floated through his mind.

That could...apply to anyone...

Something ached deep within his own heart. It was something he’d tried not to think about.

Wantz had built up his wealth and fame through evil deeds, but that had come crumbling down. His wealth was seized, and not even a shadow of his former fame still existed. He’d been the second most powerful person in this city of dreams, and now he was hiding as a fraud. Well...he’d *always* been a fraud—but now it was undeniable.

If he continued living this way, there was no pride, no dignity to be had. He’d be hollow. But even though he thought about changing his ways, he could think of no path that would lead him to an honest life.

Don’t overthink it. Right now, focus on getting something from this guy... maybe a bit of cash or something I can trade! “Hollow?” Pfft. I still have my quick wits and my silver tongue! Those are the things I polished while in Grede & Co.! Wantz scolded himself in an attempt to get his head back in the game.

“I...I accepted dirty jobs for a noble I swore allegiance to, someone I owed a great debt,” The man spoke haltingly.

Wantz grimaced.

Is this Mardas, the Laughing Guillotine?!

Wantz had heard of Mardas before. Once an assassin, he had to disappear from the public eye after a shady job went bad, giving up his A-rank adventurer status in the process.

He was the boss of the Bloodied Coin. I gave a lot of jobs to that group.

Wantz had never met the man in person, but he pulled the cloth further down over his face in fear that Mardas might guess who he was.

“I believed my duty there was for my country...and it would bring happiness

to many in the end,” said Mardas. “But my lord died...and his son took his place. He pushed the first assassination job on me, and it paid well. The scales didn’t swing the other way immediately... My sense of justice slowly corroded into self-interest as my customer base grew. A disagreement led to my deeds coming to light and they abandoned me. I lost everything...I was a crooked, broken man. I continued my assassination work here ever since that.”

“...You seem to have suffered greatly.”

Not even Wantz knew Mardas’s history in full. He assumed the man had sold his soul for money.

“But then a god appeared in my organization,” said Mardas.

“A god...?” This was unexpected.

“Yes. She used overwhelmingly powerful divine magics to destroy everything in an instant... I could do nothing but cower in fear. The god...she struck fear into my heart. She didn’t do anything else. She didn’t take a single life.”

“A god...? That’s just... I mean... Even if we assume gods exist, they don’t have the spare time to hang out in slums, dispensing justice to one person at a time, do they?” said Wantz, letting his true feelings slip.

“She was a god... I asked her if she was a god, and she said...she said was sick of being called that. She didn’t like it.”

“Uh—*huh*...”

“Then I realized something. This god...this god was trying to give me a mission. Me! She utterly destroyed the entire organization, everything I’d built up with all my negative energy. She was trying to make me change! Nothing else makes sense. It’s the only reason she’d let someone as sinful as me keep living!”

Oh, come on, thought Wantz. He decided this story had to be some delusion Mardas concocted to make up for his own failing.

It was likely true that he’d lost everything. Something similar happened to Wantz himself, after all! But to assume a *god* did that?

“The thing is...I don’t know what I should do,” continued Mardas. “Look at me.

What *could* I even do?" He gripped his own face forlornly.

Utterly absurd...but he is trying to change, isn't he?

Wantz looked at Mardas, a man in a situation very similar to his own, who sought a different path. He felt a sort of kinship with the man despite himself.

"This is ridiculous," said Wantz.

"Wh-what did you say?" said Mardas in a burst of anger.

"I said, this is ridiculous. You already see the path in front of you, don't you? Why do you need me to divine it?"

"Th-then what should I do? What can I do?!"

"The 'god' revealed the path. This black quarter, it lost Grede's protection...it lost its *value*. There will surely be many like you who have lost their place and who have lost their path. They will struggle meaninglessly. They may attempt their last acts of violence, but they can be saved. The god appeared before you so that you may bring them salvation."

"I-is it right to save me? Or people like me?"

"Yes. Many resourceful people dwell here hiding darkness within themselves. Their hearts ache... They have no other choice available. Saving them will save many others as well. That god saved you at this turning point in history."

"Do I have that sort of strength? I'm the kind of man who's got nothing but his muscles. I'd be overstepping my bounds—"

"Didn't you bring together ruffians and maintain an organization?" said Wantz, then he tossed a ring to Mardas. The large, tear-drop shaped gemstone set in it glinted green in the sunlight.

"What's this?" asked Mardas.

"It's still worth something. Sell it. It's my last—ahem, I mean...start by selling that. Then build your church for the lost. Become a cleric and spread the teachings of the god you saw."

That ring was a valuable item that he held on to as a last resort. It would be hard to transport the money he would get for it if he did sell it off, and there

was a greater risk of that money being stolen. It had been his insurance against total failure.

“Thank you, disciple of Rukh!” said Mardas.

“Work hard, man who saw a god... A path always opens after an ordeal.”
Wantz turned and walked away from the bowing man.

And with that, he had nothing left to lose. Yet for some reason, he had no regrets.

No, I haven't lost everything... I still have my words. Maybe I can live the way I want to.

After walking a short distance, Wantz looked back at Mardas. His head was still lowered.

It was expensive, but that was the last request from the great merchant Wantz to the leader of the Bloodied Coin. Please: save the people like us who have nowhere to go.

He faced forward, turned his eyes away from the blinding sunlight, and then walked on.

Afterword

THIS IS NEKOKO, the author. Thank you for buying *Disciple of the Lich* Volume 5!

This time our cover sports Kanata, Pomera, Philia, as well as Rosemonde and Ploroque's artificer, Mel! Rosemonde appeared several times in the series since she first confronted Kanata in Volume 2, but this is her first time joining everyone on the cover.

The background is the item shop, The Pixie's Wingbeats. It feels so nice with all the little items around! The cover illustration for Volume 5 came out so lively and fun! And it has five people on it—the most we've ever had in the series!

The manga version is also making progress, so I hope those of you reading the novels also check that out!



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