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The
Brilliant Healer's
New Life in the **Shadows**

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“You may call me
Ms. Lynga!”

Lynga

“I’ll be your
teacher today.”

Zophia

“Bah ha ha! It is I,
the world-famous instructor!”

Loewe

“Why is everyone wearing glasses?”



Zenos and Lily gazed at the textbooks with admiration.

“Ooh.”

Ilya

“Wow...”

Charlotte

Lily

Zenos



**“WHAT THE...
WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!”**

With a single,
unbelievably fast punch,
the five high-ranking thugs
who had tried to stand
in their way went flying...

“Just a plain ol’ teacher
of healing magic.”

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Prologue

The Kingdom of Herzeth, a major power on the continent known for its long-standing influence over its neighbors, was supported by a strict class system. At the top was the royal family, descended from the nation's ancestral founder. Below them were noble families, in turn descended from central figures in the kingdom's founding. Then there was the citizenry, who made up the majority of the population. At the very bottom were the poor, also known as the forgotten people.

The kingdom's palace—located in the capital and home to the royal family—was surrounded by a special district that housed the nobility. The estates closest to the palace belonged to seven families known as the great noble houses.

And in one of those estates, on a balcony overlooking a vast green garden, stood a young girl. With bright chestnut curls and strong-willed, slightly upturned eyes, the girl gazed silently at the sky.

A gentleman with a thick, luxurious beard opened the door to the balcony and approached her. "It's almost time for you to begin your schooling for the day, Charlotte."

"Papa..." The girl slowly turned around to face her father, Lord Fennel, one of the seven great nobles.

Lord Fennel looked at his beloved daughter Charlotte and continued, his tone filled with concern, "The magical vehicle is waiting for you. Are you ready to go?"

Magical vehicles were powered by manastones and so expensive that ordinary citizens wouldn't have been able to afford one even if they'd saved up across multiple lifetimes.

Charlotte shook her head. "I'll go by carriage today."

"Carriage?" her father echoed. "Those are slow, and harsh on your lower back

besides...”

“It’s fine. The magical vehicle would get me there far too quickly, and I wish to have time for contemplation.”

“Very well. I’ll arrange for a carriage, then.” Lord Fennel eyed his daughter with worry. “Is something troubling you, Charlotte?”

“Oh? Why do you ask?”

“Your thoughts have seemed far away of late, and you’ve been distracted.”

“Perhaps so.”

“I feel as though something in you changed after that surgery...”

Charlotte didn’t respond, silently bringing her right hand to her cheek.

In spring, a small bump had developed on her face that she’d thought would go away on its own. However, her father had heard from a former professor of the Royal Institute of Healing, with whom he’d been closely acquainted at the time, that the growth was actually something called a hag tumor. It would eventually have grown larger and resembled the face of an ugly old woman, hence the name. Charlotte had been terribly shaken by this revelation.

The former professor had come by with two assistants to perform surgery to remove the tumor, but Charlotte had reacted poorly to the idea of a blade being taken to her face. She’d been overwhelmed by despair to the point that her vision had darkened, but at the urging of one of the former professor’s assistants, she’d eventually relented.

“Could there have been an issue with the surgery?” Lord Fennel ventured anxiously.

“That’s not it,” Charlotte assured him, rubbing her cheek. “See? Not a trace of the tumor remains.”

Charlotte had been told after the surgery that it had been a very delicate and complex procedure, but the growth had been excised fully; the surgeon had been quite skilled, it seemed. She didn’t remember much from the surgery since she had been medicated, but she did remember a few words said to her in her groggy state: *“You were very brave. The surgery’s done.”*

The warm, gentle voice still echoed in her ears, and she knew it didn't belong to the former professor. No, it was the voice of one of his assistants, a man with black hair and dark eyes, wearing a black mask. Xeno, his name had been.

Since the former professor had been a frequent visitor of her father's, she'd been certain she would eventually meet the assistant once more. However, a major scandal involving the former professor had come to light, leading to the man's fall from grace. In the end, she'd never seen the assistant again.

"See?" Lord Fennel said, interrupting her reverie. "You're daydreaming again, Charlotte."

"What? I'm not, papa," she replied cheerfully, but her father only seemed even more worried.

"If this isn't related to the surgery... Are you perhaps worried about something school-related?"

"Of course not."

"Truly?"

"Truly," she said emphatically.

Her father only seemed even more worried. "I heard from the headmaster recently that another teacher quit."

"Ah, yes. But I had nothing to do with it. It was probably that lot..."

"What lot?"

Charlotte was silent for a moment, then shrugged. "You need not concern yourself with it, papa. I'm managing just fine."

Lord Fennel sighed briefly and gave a slow shake of his head. "That class is below you, Charlotte. I'll speak to the headmaster and have you transferred to a different one."

"It's quite all right. This is what I wanted."

"I'm aware, but—"

"I'll be going now."

"Charlotte—"

Ignoring her father's calls, Charlotte exited the balcony—but after she'd taken only a few steps, an idea came to her suddenly like a divine revelation, and she stopped. Slowly, she turned toward her concerned father.

"Say, papa?" she called out sweetly.

"Yes, dear?"

"Remember how I mentioned wanting an emberfox scarf for my last birthday, but you didn't give me one?"

"Y-Yes. I'm very sorry. The party I commissioned did a poor job. I'll be sure to get it for you next season."

"Oh, no, don't worry. I have a different request to make instead."

"You do? By all means." Lord Fennel nodded repeatedly. "Anything for you."

"I was thinking... Since one of the teachers quit, they need a replacement, don't they?"

"They do, yes. The headmaster mentioned the school is urgently looking for one."

"And, you know, recently I've developed an interest in a certain field..."

"You have? That's news to me. What field would this be?"

Trying to contain herself so her overprotective father wouldn't suspect anything, Charlotte cleared her throat.

"Healing magic," she explained. "I'd like this new teacher to be someone skilled in healing magic."

Chapter 1: Starting a School

Under skies of endless blue and towering clouds, the loud, persistent cries of cicadas echoed in one's eardrums. Paying no mind to the strict social ladder, the midsummer did not discriminate; the sun shone brightly on all layers of society.

This included a certain unlicensed-yet-brilliant healer, who due to his status as a poor man, had quietly opened a clinic in an abandoned, ruined part of the city. Bathed in the slanting sunrays filtering in from the window, a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead, Zenos sat face-to-face with a demi-human boy.

Humming softly, he examined the child's right knee closely.

"Um, doctor?" the boy called out, sitting quietly before the healer. "How is it?"

"The bone is fractured," Zenos explained.

"Whaaat?!" The boy looked as though he was about to cry. "Can you heal it?"

"I can, yes, but..." Zenos trailed off, placing his right hand on the boy's knee. "*Heal.*" White light flowed from the palm of his hand, gently enveloping and mending the fracture.

"Oh! The pain's gone! That's so cool! Thanks, doctor!" The boy jumped off the chair with great enthusiasm, hopping joyfully in place. He held out a few unusual nuts as a token of gratitude.

"Oh, abia nuts, eh?" Zenos didn't normally charge children, but he wouldn't refuse a gift. "They're quite a delicacy. Thank you."

The boy giggled. "I'll get going now!"

"Oh, wait a moment, please," Zenos called out before the boy could leave.

"Yeah?"

"Weren't you hurt in that exact same spot recently?"

"Oh! Yeah." The boy nodded, looking a bit uncomfortable. "But, like, I dunno.

I'm not used to the work yet, so..."

Zenos had heard that the boy logged and transported wood. His workplace was in the dangerous forested area beyond the slums, where magical beasts were known to occasionally appear.

"Take it easy, all right? Your bones, muscles, and joints are still weak. You can't do the same things adults can."

"I know, but I gotta make coin for my sister too..."

"I guess..." Zenos scratched his head. "Well, I'll heal you if you get hurt. But remember, I can't cure death."

"Okay. I got it," the boy said, waving and sauntering off energetically.

Does he really? With a sigh, Zenos stared at the closed door. A glass of iced tea was held out to him from the side.

"Busy day?" asked Lily, the young elven girl who doubled as the clinic's nurse and receptionist.

Zenos thanked her and drank the chilled tea, the refreshing sensation washing over his body. "Your tea always hits the spot, Lily."

"I think using different leaves was a good idea," Lynga pointed out.

"Indeed, this is much better suited for the hot season," Loewe agreed.

Zophia chuckled. "Check out these *prestigious* tea sommeliers over here."

As usual, the three leaders of the major demi-human factions of the slums were lounging on the clinic's sofa. Sitting at the far end was the wraith Carmilla, holding a glass in one hand.

"What might the matter be, Zenos? You seem to be in rather low spirits," she mused. "And on such a beautiful day too. You ought to cheer up."

"Should a wraith be glad about a sunny day?" Zenos asked. The sun and undead didn't mix, after all.

Carmilla smiled fearlessly. "Hee hee hee... I have been around living creatures long enough of late that I feel like I could withstand even direct sunlight," she declared boldly, floating over to the entrance. She vigorously pushed the front

door open and stood proudly in the sunlight. “Ha ha ha! Behold! I have finally conquered the sun!”

Despite her valiant proclamation, however, smoke began to billow up from her feet.

“Oh...? Oh. I appear to be melting.”

“W-Waaah! Carmilla!” Lily hurriedly ran over and slammed the door shut, panting heavily. “Y-You can’t do that, Carmilla! You’ll get purified!”

Carmilla grunted in annoyance. “Accursed sun.” Having quickly changed her mind, the wraith returned to the dining table. “Either way! Why so glum, Zenos?”

“Oh, you’re going to act like that didn’t just happen. Okay. Also, seriously, don’t pull a stunt like that again. It’s actually dangerous!” he chastised, pointing a finger at the wraith before asking Lily for another glass of tea. “And I’m not glum or anything. I was just thinking about how many kids are in that boy’s situation.”

“The demi-human boy just now, you mean,” Carmilla said, arms crossed. It wasn’t uncommon for children in the slums to have to perform harsh physical labor.

Zophia spoke up next. “Yeah. Our guys manage, but most of the people in the slums are just barely scraping by every day.”

Though the three major groups led by Zophia, Lynga, and Loewe managed to keep themselves afloat through their respective trades, it was indeed true that many of the residents of the slums lived hand to mouth. When the three had time, they’d team up with Lily to provide meals to people, but even that was a drop in the ocean to the thousands of starving residents.

“The poor can’t get proper jobs, so they don’t have any benefits or salaries,” Lynga pointed out. “They inevitably turn to dangerous work.”

“Such has always been the way of this country,” Loewe added. “It’s nothing new.”

“True, but still.” Zenos sighed, resting his cheek on his hand. Up until now,

he'd been trying not to stand out, doing what he could while asking for appropriate compensation for his services. And he still had that mindset, of course.

It was just that he'd been thinking of his old mentor more these days, after his underground face-off against his fellow former student Velitra. That, and seeing the illusion of the old man.

“A third-rate healer just mends wounds. A second-rate healer heals people. A first-rate healer makes the world a better place,” Zenos muttered absentmindedly, recalling one of his mentor's sayings. “Hmm...” He stared vacantly at the tea in his glass. “Actually, there's something I've been thinking about for a while now.”

Zenos cleared his throat softly, looking around at everyone in the room.

“What do you guys think about starting a school in the slums?”

After a long collective silence, Lily was the first to speak up. “A school, like...the kind with teachers and students?”

“Yes, that kind of school,” Zenos confirmed, nodding slowly. “I don't really know how to explain it, but I feel like even now what I learned from my mentor is valuable.”

It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that meeting his mentor had changed his life. If he hadn't been fortunate enough to, and had instead just led an ordinary life in the slums, he wouldn't have had half of the opportunities he'd come across in life. Of course, just teaching children something wouldn't immediately change their lives—the poor would remain poor, and their place at the bottom of Herzeth's society wouldn't change.

Still, it would sow seeds that just might sprout somewhere someday.

“Fortunately, there are plenty of unused buildings in the ruined city, so we could repurpose one into a school,” Zenos suggested upon noticing everyone's dumbfounded stares. “Well, after a lot of renovations, that is. Bad idea?”

Lily shook her head vigorously. “No, I think it's a wonderful idea!”

“Sounds really fun,” Lynga said.

“I’m quite excited,” Loewe added.

As the atmosphere began to grow lively, a calm voice cut in. “How smoothly would that go, I wonder?” All gazes turned to Carmilla as she brought her tea glass to her lips and took a sip. “Which is not to say I am opposed to the idea. I believe starting a school to be a wonderful notion, in fact. And I have the feeling the venture would be greatly entertaining.”

“Your predictions usually come true in the worst possible ways,” Zenos pointed out.

“Well, let us leave that aside for now. Who, exactly, will be teaching? What will they be teaching? How? Mentorship requires a certain amount of expertise.”

“I don’t know that I want to set that aside, but fine. And you have a good point...”

Now that Zenos thought about it, his mentor had been skilled at teaching. To the more logical Velitra, he’d taught theory thoroughly, whereas to the intuitive Zenos he’d taught primarily through practice. He’d adapted his methods to suit the student, and weaved a variety of other knowledge into casual conversation so they could learn naturally.

His mentor had held a leading position at the Royal Institute of Healing, though. Of course he’d been able to do all that.

“And besides, Zenos, you are hardly suited to be an educator,” Carmilla noted.

“True, I suppose.”

“What? No!” Lily interjected. “Zenos is really nice!”

Zenos crossed his arms with a groan. “Yeah, but I mostly go by feel when it comes to magic. I don’t know that I have the confidence to teach other people.”

True, he could teach the basics of healing magic, which he’d learned from his mentor, if nothing else. But his protective and enhancement magic, which he’d picked up after joining his former party, had been mostly self-taught. He would

have difficulty articulating the principles to others.

“The fact you managed to teach yourself different types of magic to the point of mastery is abnormal in its own right,” Carmilla pointed out.

“Healing, protection, and enhancement magic all work by enhancing bodily functions. I just tried using the same principles as healing magic and managed, somehow.”

“‘Managed somehow,’ he says,” the wraith muttered quietly. “You would anger any aspiring mage with a statement like that.”

Zenos let out a small sigh. “If only Velitra were here...” She would’ve been thorough in her teachings, including theory—he was sure of it. But she had likely already left the capital by now.

The mood began to sour, and Carmilla shrugged slightly before continuing, “Well, you cannot expect perfection from the start. Try a mock lesson with Lily as your student, perhaps?”

“Me?” Lily asked, pointing to herself in surprise.

The demi-human leaders also stood up enthusiastically. “That’s right. You won’t know until you try,” Zophia said. “How about we all take a week to prepare?”

“I’m in!” Lynga exclaimed.

“I’m eager to participate as well,” Loewe chimed in.

“You guys are gonna teach too?” Zenos asked.

The three women nodded vigorously. “Of course,” Zophia replied. “We can’t have you pulling all the weight, doc. Let us help. I think we have a lot we could teach too.”

“I might not look it, but I’m a pretty good teacher,” Lynga declared.

Loewe laughed heartily. “Time to show everyone that I’m more than my sculpted muscles!”

After the three enthusiastic demi-human leaders left, Carmilla’s lips curved into a grin. “Heh heh heh. This is already shaping up to be great fun.”

“When are you ever not having fun?” Zenos muttered.

The week went by in a flash, and soon the day of the mock lesson had arrived. The noisy chorus of cicadas was the same as every other day outside, but within the clinic, the atmosphere was a little tense.

“I’m a bit nervous,” Lily murmured, sitting quietly in front of the blackboard which they had obtained from the black market.

“It is time,” Carmilla murmured. Almost simultaneously, the door to the clinic burst open.

“Hey doc, we’re here!” Zophia, wearing glasses, announced energetically. “I mean, uh, we’ve arrived? Pretend I sounded teacherly when I said that.”

“You may call me Ms. Lynga from now on!” Lynga declared, following after the lizardwoman and dramatically adjusting her own glasses.

Laughing heartily, Loewe walked in, the lenses of her spectacles gleaming brightly. “It is I, the world-famous instructor!”

“Why is everyone wearing glasses?” Zenos couldn’t help but ask.

The three demi-humans exchanged awkward glances. “Well, glasses just have a way of making you look smart,” Zophia explained.

“I thought it was a great idea,” Lynga added.

“Indeed, and...we all had the same idea, apparently,” Loewe pointed out.

Carmilla chuckled, dramatically shrugging her shoulders. “Peas in a pod,” she murmured. “I fear for the future generations.”

“Don’t knock my teaching until you’ve seen it!” Zophia protested. It sounded like she was going first. She stood confidently in front of the blackboard, looking quite the part, as befitted someone who commanded many others. She brought a finger to the edge of her glasses and pushed them up. “All right, class, we’re getting started. Everyone ready?”

“Yes, Ms. Zophia!” Lily, the student, replied with a raised right hand.

“I guess I’ll sit in, then,” Zenos said, standing a little ways away from Lily and

crossing his arms.

Carmilla floated over next to him, seeming unusually amused. “Hee hee hee... Now to see how this will turn out.”

Thus was the first step taken in the plan to build a school in the slums.

Slightly tense, Zophia cleared her throat. “Now then, my class is about...”

Lily swallowed nervously.

“...the secrets of thievery!” the teacher concluded in a firm tone.

“Hey,” Zenos chided. Things were taking a turn for the shady.

Zophia pointed at Lily, gazing sharply at the young girl. “You there! The elf in the front row! What does one need to become a thief?”

“I... I don’t know,” Lily stammered.

“Oh dear. Well, it *is* your first day, so I’ll cut you some slack and make it a multiple-choice question. Choice A, agility! Choice B, quick thinking! Choice C, guts! Which of the three is it?”

“U-Umm, A?”

“Wrong!”

“Th-Then, B?”

“Wrong!”

“Choice C!”

“Wrong again!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

Zophia proudly declared to her shocked student, “It’s none of the three! The correct answer is preparation!”

“P-Preparation?”

“Yes. What is the layout of the target’s mansion? Where do they hide their valuables? How is their personnel arranged, and what are their schedules?”

What equipment do the guards have? Who calls the shots? How do you secure escape routes? What are your contingency plans if you fail? Thorough investigation and planning are key! Agility, quick thinking, and guts are secondary!”

Zophia solemnly adjusted her glasses once more.

“So repeat after me: thievery is ninety percent preparation.”

“Thievery...is ninety percent preparation,” Lily said timidly.

“Again! Thievery is ninety percent preparation!”

“Thievery is ninety percent preparation!”

“Listen, you guys—” Zenos attempted to interject, stretching out an arm. But before he could finish his sentence, Lily spoke up, looking a bit annoyed.

“B-But miss, that wasn’t one of the options!”

Zophia suddenly reached for Lily’s head, gripping it firmly. “Good job noticing that!”

“H-Huh? Really?”

“Do you have any idea why the answer wasn’t among the provided options?”

“I-I don’t!”

“Normally, it would be. That’s just common sense. However, it’s important to think outside the box!”

“What does that mean?”

“It means to question the obvious! Your opponent might think, ‘Obviously they wouldn’t break in from here. Obviously they wouldn’t choose this method.’ And by turning the obvious on its head, you can exploit the opponent’s blind spots. *That* was what I wanted to teach you.”

“O-Oh!” Lily exclaimed as she began to take notes.

Watching her student’s pen glide across the paper, Zophia spoke with satisfaction. “That is the true core of thievery: think outside the box.”

“Think outside the box!”



“Say it again! Think outside the box!”

“Think outside the box!”

“Again!!! Think outside the box!!!”

“Think outside the box!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Wait! Hold up a second! Zophia, Lily!” Zenos yelled, unable to help himself.

Carmilla chuckled. “I knew this would be fun.”

“What is it, doc?” Zophia asked, glaring at the healer. “I’m in the middle of a class here.”

“Yeah! Think outside the box, Zenos!” Lily declared, also glaring at him for some reason.

“Look, I get you’re getting excited, and some of these things are good knowledge, yeah, but the subject matter is what worries me here!”

Zophia stared at Zenos, wide-eyed and bewildered. She was a practitioner of righteous thievery; to her, its principles were a natural subject. However, it was questionable whether this was something appropriate to teach to children. It felt more like a thief training operation than an actual school, and it felt like Lily was on the verge of stepping into the world of thievery.

“You’re right,” she muttered, slumping her shoulders dejectedly. “The whole point of starting a school is so that children don’t have to turn to thievery to survive. What am I doing? I’m sorry, Lily, doc.”

“N-No, it’s okay,” Lily said. “I went and got carried away...”

“I appreciate the effort, Zophia. None of us have the right answers yet. Let’s keep trying different things to see what sticks,” Zenos offered, and the lizardwoman’s spirits seemed to lift a bit. Regardless of the subject matter, her passion for the lesson and the ability to enrapture her student showed her qualities as a leader of many.

Next, the boss of the werewolves leaped in front of the blackboard. “Ha ha! My turn! Step aside, Zophia. I’ll show you what a real lesson is!”

Watching the confident Lynga, Zenos muttered quietly, “That doesn’t sound

good, does it?”

Carmilla chuckled, crossing her arms excitedly as the second lesson began. “It truly does not.”

Standing at the podium, Lynga adjusted her glasses and spoke haughtily. “Now, my student, are you ready to show me proper respect?”

Lily promptly raised her right hand. “Yes, miss! I respect you greatly, miss!”

“Lily’s getting a little too into the whole student role,” Zenos murmured anxiously.

Unlike him, Lynga was satisfied with Lily’s response and banged on the blackboard, declaring, “Today’s lesson is on how to cheat at gambling!”

“Yep. Saw that coming.” Zenos slumped his shoulders.

Carmilla bit back a laugh.

Lynga, the boss of the werewolves who just so happened to run a gambling den, raised an index finger and pointed at Lily. “Now! Tell me, what is the key to cheating?”

“U-Um, not getting caught?” Lily ventured.

“Hmm. Not bad. Not bad at all, my student.” The bespectacled werewolf still seemed dissatisfied, however, and took a step forward. “A solid guess, but the true answer is this: confidence and boldness!”

“Confidence and boldness!” Lily repeated.

Lynga nodded vigorously. “That’s right. Small-time cheaters sneak around, fearing being caught. But that behavior only makes them seem more suspicious! A big-time cheater like me can do it without batting an eye! The trick is to act like you’re not doing anything wrong!”

“I-I see!”

“All right, break time. Break, now,” Zenos interjected, raising a hand. “Look, sorry to interrupt, but again, the subject matter is a problem!”

Just like Zophia, Lynga was remarkably good at enrapturing her student. But

as a result, the innocent Lily had learned not only the secrets of thievery, but also how to cheat at gambling! And her eyes seemed to be gleaming too!

Lynga's ears drooped and went flat. "I'm sorry. When you stopped Zophia, I realized my chosen topic wasn't good either."

"Really? Then why did you go through with it anyway?" Zenos asked.

"Because I think you should be confident and bold, even when you're wrong. That's what I wanted to teach."

That was surprisingly admirable, actually. Or was it? Zenos couldn't tell anymore.

"Hee hee hee! They never disappoint," Carmilla remarked, thoroughly enjoying herself.

Lynga stepped back dejectedly and Loewe took a firm stance before the blackboard. "It seems neither of you were ready to take on the role of teacher, Zophia and Lynga. But fear not, Zenos! My lesson will be truly useful!"

"Uh... Can I even expect anything at this point?" Zenos asked.

The wraith snickered. "Oh, I know / can certainly expect something."

Ninety percent anxious and ten percent expectant, Zenos watched the third lesson next to Carmilla.

"My lesson," Loewe began confidently, "is on how to defeat a man-eating bear with just your hands! Useful, no?"

"Loewe, about that—"

Before Zenos could stop her, Loewe thrust her right fist forward, sending forth a gust of wind that lifted Lily's bangs. "And that's how! Now try it, Lily!"

"Um, like...this?" Lily attempted to mimic Loewe, throwing a punch with her scrawny arm.

"No! Too weak! The important thing is to punch with enough force to stop the heart!"

"Stop the heart?" Lily echoed. "Um, miss, how...do I do that?"

“Put your back into it.”

“Put my back into it...?”

“You can do anything you put your back into! Now for the second half of the lesson, we’ll go to the mountains!”

“Stop right there!” Zenos shouted, looking up at the ceiling. “Are you trying to kill your student?! And why a bear? Don’t you mine manastones? At least talk about that!”

Carmilla was clutching her stomach at this point. “Hee hee hee! This is the best lesson ever.”

The teachers glowered at her, disgruntled. “You’ve been laughing and laughing, but you’re no better, Carmilla,” Zophia said accusingly.

“Yeah! I’d love to see you do better than me,” Lynga grumbled.

“My bear-fighting lesson is the best,” Loewe declared.

“Oh?” Carmilla suddenly stopped laughing, lifted the bottom of her kimono, and smirked. “Very well. I suppose I shall demonstrate what I can do.”

“Really? You too?” Zenos asked.

“Naturally. I had a pair of glasses ready just in case!”

“Why is everyone wearing glasses?!”

The apex undead, now bespectacled, floated gracefully to the blackboard. Zenos watched, now one hundred percent anxious.

“Hee hee hee... Now, let the lesson from the wisest being on the continent begin,” Carmilla declared boldly from the podium.

“Are you really the wisest being on the continent?” Zenos asked.

“No.”

“No?!”

After the familiar exchange, Lily once again eagerly raised her right hand. “Please go ahead, Ms. Carmilla!”

The wraith chuckled. “Good answer. You are indeed fortunate to be on the receiving end of such a valuable lesson. Bask in gratitude for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and let the joy flood your brain as your teeth chatter in sheer excitement. Now then—”

“Just start already,” Zenos grouched.

Carmilla furrowed her brows as her lengthy preamble was interrupted. “Have patience, Zenos. Now, listen carefully. My lesson is about...” She paused dramatically before continuing, “...the ecology of demons!”

The room fell silent.

“Ah ha ha ha! This is a marvelous lesson, I would have you know! Demons are believed to have perished alongside the Demon Lord in the demon-human war three hundred years ago. They are but fairy tales in the present day! Only legends and anecdotes remain from that mythical era! This is a secret lesson only I, who have been alive for three hundred years, can teach!”

“Okay, but...is that useful?” Zophia asked coolly.

“What?” Carmilla’s eyes widened. “What are you saying? This is priceless knowledge.”

“Sure, but demons are already extinct, right?”

“Huh?”

“I don’t think there’s any point in learning about an enemy that no longer exists,” Lynga pointed out.

“What did you say?”

“Indeed. You’re more likely to run into a bear than a demon.”

With each remark, Carmilla’s face grew more blank. After a moment of silence, she mumbled a weak excuse and changed the topic. “I lied. The true lesson is how to craft a love potion, an item highly popular three hundred years ago!”

“I want to learn, miss!” Lily exclaimed eagerly, raising her right hand with gusto.

The three demi-humans were also standing in a row, their right hands stretched toward the ceiling in a beautifully synchronized formation.

Carmilla, now a bit more cheerful, resumed her chuckling. “Shallow creatures. Very well. This potion was so effective that it allegedly increased the birth rate tenfold in towns where it circulated.” She pointed a finger at the eager women. “The most important ingredient is the petal of the modiscura blossom! This rare flower blooms only under a new moon and affects the brain of the opposite sex, disrupting their judgment and inducing infatuation! Once imbibed, it drowns one in a sea of love!”

“Where can we find it, miss?!” Lily asked.

“When’s the next new moon?!” Zophia asked as well.

“I’m sending all my men out for that flower!” Lynga declared. “It’s all mine!”

“No, I will be the one to obtain it!” Loewe asserted.

As the women glared at one another, Carmilla said smugly, “You naive creatures! Because of an excess of dirty-minded fools like you, the flower was quickly overharvested and went extinct shortly after its discovery!”

An icy silence fell upon the room. Under the women’s frigid stares, Carmilla said, “Huh?” then quietly placed her glasses on the podium before fading away in a hasty retreat.

“Carmilla! Get back here!” Zophia demanded.

“She’s really good at raising then crushing your expectations, I have to admit,” Lynga mused.

“What in the world was that?” Loewe muttered.

“I had fun,” Lily said. “But I really wanted the love potion...”

It dawned on Zenos just how difficult it was to teach others. Also, how did Carmilla know about the ecology of demons? Had that been common knowledge three hundred years ago, or had she been in some sort of unique position at the time? Even after living together for months, he still knew so little about the wraith.

“Hey, doc?” Zophia called out, now calmer and seated. “We really need

someone with proper teaching experience, don't we?"

"I guess so, yeah," Zenos agreed, crossing his arms and nodding.

"Me and my men never got a formal education," Lynga explained. "Since we never got properly taught, I can't see any of us being any good at teaching others."

"Indeed," Loewe said. "There's only so much we can do with improvised lessons."

"Well, it's true that having an actual teacher would be best, but..." Zenos stared off into the distance, thinking of the people he'd interacted with. Was there anyone among them who'd been involved in formal education, preferably in a teaching position?

His mentor was no longer around. Goldran was a former professor of the Royal Institute of Healing, but he'd been disgraced. One other educator came to mind, but he— Just then, there was a soft knock on the door to the clinic, and it slowly creaked open.

"Hello," said a man standing at the entrance. "It's been a while, Zenos."

"No way!"

Lily and the demi-humans rushed toward the new arrival.

"Huh? What's going on?" the visitor asked, surprised by the sudden welcome. His narrow eyes widened slightly.

"Why are you here?" Zenos asked with a hint of astonishment. This was the exact man Zenos had been thinking of—an elite healer from the Royal Institute, and the person who had once invited Zenos to go there.

Elnard Becker.

"Look, Zenos! A real teacher!" Lily exclaimed at the sight of Becker, who was clad in the white robes of the Royal Institute of Healing.

"Yep," Zophia agreed. "A bona fide teacher."

"And if I recall correctly, he's an elite healer too, right?" Lynga added.

“Real...teacher...” Loewe groaned. Maybe her excitement was so great that she was speaking in broken sentences?

Lily and the three demi-humans swarmed like zombies around Becker.

“Um, hello...?” Overwhelmed by the horde, Becker raised his hands defensively as he backed off.

“Guys, cut it out,” Zenos intervened. “You’re making the ‘real teacher’ uncomfortable.”

The zombies froze in place, rasping one after the other,
“Teacher...uncomfortable...”

“Uncomfortable...”

“Not...good...”

“We...stop...”

“Uh,” Zenos interjected. “Why is everyone speaking in broken sentences now?”

Finally, the education-starved horde calmed down and guided Becker to the examination room.

“Goodness, I thought I’d walked in on a postapocalyptic nightmare for a second there. I’m honored by the, ah, frighteningly passionate welcome.” With an unreadable smile, Becker bowed his head.

“So, what brings you here?” Zenos asked. The last time Becker had come to the clinic, he’d been looking for a missing researcher and forcibly recruited Zenos into the Royal Institute of Healing as a trainee. A shrewd man like him wouldn’t have stopped by just to catch up.

“Well, a lot has happened...”

“So you’ve been released.”

“Yes, just the other day. I’m really grateful for all of your and Krishna’s help back then.” Becker’s expression relaxed slightly as he handed Zenos a package.

During the search for the missing man, Becker had been arrested by the Royal Guard after the unprecedented mass poisoning attempt at the Royal Institute of

Healing. Zenos had pointed out the possibility that someone else could've been the true culprit, however, and so Vice Commander Krishna had worked toward Becker's release.

Zenos opened the package, revealing an assortment of expensive fruits. "So, why are you here? It can't have been just to bring me a gift, right?"

"Sharp as ever," Becker noted. "I do wish delivering my thanks was the only business I had here, though." He scratched his forehead, then produced a letter from his coat. "There's actually a summons from the Royal Institute for you, Zenos. Or, well, for 'Xeno,' to be precise."

Xeno was the alias Zenos had used during his infiltration of the Royal Institute of Healing.

"For me?" he asked. "Why? I was just a special trainee."

The special trainee program allowed promising individuals to be referred to rotate through working in several different departments of the Royal Institute for a time. Zenos had been enrolled in the program so he could infiltrate the Institute, but he was still an outsider.

"I'm not sure of the details myself," Becker admitted. "It was an order from the higher-ups."

"Aren't you an elite healer? Doesn't that make *you* a higher-up?"

"The decision was made before my release, it seems. Also, due to the mass poisoning incident, I've been removed from key meetings for the time being. Ha ha...ha."

Zophia, standing by the wall, spoke up. "I don't like this." She folded her arms, glaring at Becker. "We were excited just now to finally have a real teacher show up, but...now you're saying you're here to gallivant off with the doc again?"

"Your anger is justified," Becker replied. "I plan on refusing their request."

"Huh. You backed off, just like that."

"I caused Zenos a lot of trouble, and I owe him a great deal. I'll inform the Royal Institute that 'Xeno' is abroad and couldn't be contacted. I just came here in person to warn you, since someone else could come looking for you in my

place.”

Zenos hummed thoughtfully. “Won’t you be in an even more precarious position if you don’t bring me along?”

“I appreciate your concern, but this is a grave I dug myself, so I should be the one to lie in it,” Becker said as he stood up. “Now then, I should get going...”

“Out of curiosity, what is it the Institute wants from me?”

“Oh, well, it’s a somewhat unusual request...” Becker unfolded the summons and showed the paper to Zenos. “Apparently they want you to be a temporary instructor at a school for the children of nobles.”

“An instructor?”

Everyone’s eyes were suddenly glued to the paper and its unexpected contents. “Look, Zenos, it says ‘school’ right there!” Lily exclaimed.

“Yep, it sure does,” Zophia confirmed.

“And he said it’s a school for nobles!” Lynga added.

“That would make it one of the best in the country, no?” Loewe mused.

“Um... What’s happening, exactly?” Becker asked, giving the women a puzzled look. “Either way, I need to figure out a way to gracefully decline the request, so I’ll be—”

“Wait, waaait!” Zenos called out as Becker headed for the door. “Tell me more about it.”

“Uh, sure. I don’t mind...” At everyone else’s urging, a bewildered Becker left the examination room with the others and headed toward the dining area in the back. “I thought you’d refuse the request, Zenos. Why the interest?”

“Well, a lot has happened on our end too.”

“I see. Well, to cut a long story short, one of the instructors at that school quit recently, and they need a replacement.”

“A replacement,” Zenos echoed, listening intently as he sat opposite Becker. “I see.”

The plan to build a school in the slums was already nearly dead before it had

even gotten past the mock lesson stage since none of them had attended a proper school. Teaching at a school for nobles was an interesting proposition—it'd help him understand what went into formal education, if nothing else. There were things Zenos still didn't understand, however.

“Why me, though? Surely there are plenty of other candidates.”

“It sounds like they're specifically looking for someone with healing magic expertise.”

“Healing magic? Do nobles learn that?”

Becker stroked his chin. “Zenos, how much do you know about the education system in Herzeth?”

“Honestly, not much.” He vaguely remembered his mentor mentioning it once upon a time, but he hadn't thought it would be relevant to a poor man like himself, so he hadn't retained much of that information.

Becker nodded slightly, then looked around at everyone as he continued, “Citizens and above are entitled to attend elementary school starting at the age of seven, where they learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic, as well as the geography and history of the continent.”

The demi-humans, also seated at the table, quickly interjected one after the other.

“Huh. Quite the privilege, that. At that age I was still scavenging scraps from street corners,” Zophia pointed out.

“Yeah,” Lynga agreed. “The closest thing to geography I knew was where I could find food more easily.”

“Reading and writing weren't as important as living to see the next day,” Loewe added.

“That sounds quite rough,” Becker mused. “Although, well, not *every* citizen attends school. Sometimes there are financial issues or parental decisions preventing a child from doing so.” Becker scratched his cheek. “After elementary school, those who wish to can take an exam to attend secondary school, which is more like a place to assess people's vocational aptitudes.”

“Vocational aptitudes?” Zenos asked.

Becker nodded. “Indeed. Those with magical power could become mages. Those skilled with their hands could become craftsmen. Those who are suited for combat might join the military, and so forth. Students get experience in various fields to determine their aptitudes. After that, they proceed to specialized education courses.” So if they wanted to be a healer upon graduating secondary school, for example, they would attend the training branch of the Royal Institute of Healing.

“Uh-huh. But how does that relate to nobles learning healing magic?” Zenos asked.

“Right. So, what I mentioned thus far applies to citizens, but it’s a bit different for nobles. Citizens have their aptitudes assessed in secondary school and then proceed to specialized education. Nobles, however, typically move on to high school where they receive comprehensive education as the future leaders of the nation.”

Comprehensive education meant studying various fields, healing magic among them—which was why they were looking for someone who could teach it.

Zenos tilted his head. “I get that, but the Royal Institute is full of skilled healing magic users, right? I mean, *you* could do that job, for instance. So why me?”

“I don’t know the particulars either, but it sounds like you were personally requested by the headmaster.”

“That makes even less sense. I’ve never met the headmaster of a school for nobles.”

“That’s why I think the request came from further up the chain.”

“Further up than that?”

Becker leaned forward, speaking conspiratorially. “There are varying power dynamics among nobles. A noble who could influence something like a teacher appointment must be of high rank and a significant donor to the school. Like...someone from one of the seven great noble houses, for instance.”

“The seven great noble houses,” Zenos echoed. Those were the highest-ranking nobles, whose power was said to be second only to the royal family. He had only ever met one of them. “Lord Fennel...?”

Becker didn’t answer, staring intently into Zenos’s eyes instead.

“How long is this appointment for, by the way?” Zenos asked.

“Since it’s unofficial, the position is temporary and will last until the end-of-term break. About two months, I hear.”

“That sounds good. I can’t be away from the clinic for too long. I can come back here on my days off, right?”

“Zenos...?” Becker murmured, puzzled.

“I’ll give it a try. Don’t know if I’ll be any good at it, though.”

Becker’s narrow eyes widened.

Zophia pointed at Becker with concern. “Are you sure about this, doc? Why don’t we just get him to help with the school in the slums? He knows about schools, right?”

“Well, his position is already precarious due to the mass poisoning incident. If people find out he’s involved with the slums, he could get arrested again.”

If Becker got in trouble, that would also affect the other members of his lab, Umin included. Moreover, if the seven great noble houses were involved, trying to evade the summons could further complicate matters.

Zenos placed his hands on the table and slowly rose to his feet. “This will be a good opportunity to get firsthand experience of the best education this country has to offer. And it’s just for a little while, anyway.”

“Goodness, I was not expecting this reaction,” a surprised Becker said. “Did something happen to you recently?”

Zenos lightly gripped the collar of his black cloak. “I saw *him* again underground. That man was a real menace, teaching kids from the slums despite not having anything to gain from it...”

“I see. So you and he...” Becker’s narrow eyes widened once more.

Zenos's master had been a friend to Becker in the past. After he was cursed for dabbling in resurrection magic, however, those that had known him had slowly lost their memories of him. Still, his deep connection with Becker meant that some of the elite healer's memories of him had remained, though they were vague. It was at Becker's behest that Zenos had searched for his mentor's journal.

"I understand. If that's your wish, then you have my full support." Becker smiled faintly, pushing to his feet as well. "I'll teach you what you need to know about education bit by bit, but do remember this one thing." He raised his index finger, his expression serious. "Your students may be children, but they are also nobles. Be careful in your interactions with them."

Chapter 2: The Unconventional Teacher

Five days after receiving the summons from the Royal Institute of Healing, Zenos, accompanied by Becker, visited Ledelucia Academy—a school located in the nobles' special district and attended by the children of the ruling class.

"Huh. This is a school?" Zenos asked as he looked beyond the towering iron gates at the white, luxurious building that looked more like a palace.

"It's a prestigious academy," Becker explained, clad in his pristine white coat as usual. "Generations of nobles have studied here."

"It feels like just attending this place would make you smarter," Lily said from behind the pair, gaping in amazement. Her ears were covered by earmuffs, and she was once again accompanying Zenos under the guise of being his little sister. The academy had a dormitory for teachers where they would be staying during the rest of the term.

"Hee hee hee... What awaits us this time, I wonder?" mused a voice coming from the old-fashioned staff in Lily's hands as it vibrated slightly.

Zenos spoke quietly to the staff, careful not to let Becker hear. "I'm sure you know this, but behave, yeah?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Incidentally, I do believe stories about ghosts in the dead of night are a staple in schools..."

"You're not gonna behave at all!" Zenos snapped.

"Is something wrong, Zenos?" Becker asked.

"Oh, no, nothing." Zenos pulled away from the staff and followed Becker inside the academy.

"W-Wow, Zenos, something smells really nice," Lily said.

Zenos let out a soft grunt. "Is this how nobles smell?"

"I'm fairly sure it's just the smell of the flowerbeds," Becker said with an awkward smile as he completed the formalities at the guard station by the

entrance. “I see you two are as amusing as ever.”

The area was swarming with heavily armored sentries—likely members of the Royal Guard—keeping a keen eye on the flow of people. Zenos took a quick glance around, but saw no sign of Krishna. The Royal Guard was divided into different units: palace guards, noble district patrolmen, and security officers in the city district. The security of the nobles’ school was likely outside of Krishna’s jurisdiction.

First, Becker and Zenos dropped Lily off at the staff dormitory, then headed into the main building. Unsurprisingly, it was luxurious, with hallways spacious enough for ten people to walk side by side and expensive-looking paintings adorning the walls at regular intervals. They made their way toward their destination, trying not to trip over the long, deep-crimson fur carpet, and finally arrived at a door labeled “Reception Room.”

“Here we are,” Becker said. “The first hurdle.”

They went inside to meet with the school’s administrator, a middle-aged bald man who was sitting on the sofa at the back of the room wearing a haughty expression. “I am Vice Principal Dange Bilsen,” the man said in an excessively intimidating tone, his arms crossed over his chest. “You must be Xeno.”

“Vice Principal Bilsen,” Becker said in greeting. “Where is the headmaster?”

“Away on urgent business. I will be handling this matter. Or are you implying I am not sufficient?”

“Oh, not at all.” Becker cleared his throat, then placed a hand on his chest. “I am Elnard Becker, an elite healer with the Royal Institute of Healing. I’m here to accompany the new temporary teacher, Xeno.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard,” the vice principal said irritably, flipping through the papers on his desk. “He was a former trainee under the disgraced Goldran. Working under a man like him is bad enough, but he wasn’t even formally employed. And Becker, pardon the disrespect considering your position as an elite healer, but I’ve heard you were arrested. I’m unsure whether I can really trust this man.”

Becker let out a soft, genial laugh. “Well, I happen to have been officially

exonerated.”

“Hmph. Be that as it may, this man has no notable achievements. Why would Lord Fennel recommend a nobody like him, even for a temporary position?”

An awkward silence fell upon the room. It was clear neither Zenos nor Becker were particularly welcome. But thanks to this exchange, Zenos now knew that Lord Fennel, a member of one of the seven great noble houses, had been involved in the summons.

From his seat, the vice principal pointed at Zenos. “We receive substantial donations from Lord Fennel. On the headmaster’s authority, we’ve accepted you on a temporary basis. However, should any trouble arise, you will be summarily dismissed. Keep that in mind.”

Used to being treated this way, Zenos simply nodded with a neutral expression.

The vice principal’s lips curled into a sadistic smile. “Well, you’ll likely be asking to resign before long either way.”

“What are you talking about?” Becker asked.

With a sneer, the vice principal said to Zenos, “Xeno, you’re being appointed as the homeroom teacher for Class F.”

“Homeroom teacher?” Zenos echoed. “I thought I was here to teach healing magic.”

“We’re short-staffed. You’ll be teaching some healing magic, yes, but until we find a permanent homeroom teacher, you’ll be filling that role too. We’re under pressure to comply with certain demands, so you have no choice.”

Becker stepped forward. “Please wait a moment. I thought the academy only had classes from A to E?”

“It’s a newly established, experimental class that will only be meeting for a limited period. All the more rewarding of a challenge, wouldn’t you agree?”

With that, the vice principal ended the meeting, leaving Becker and Zenos behind in the reception room. A class representative would be coming to meet them shortly.

“I’m sorry, Xeno,” Becker said. “Things took an unexpected turn...”

“Well, my goal is to experience what authentic schooling looks like, so it makes no difference whether I’m here to be a healing magic instructor or a homeroom teacher.” Zenos paused, then looked at Becker. “Also, what does a homeroom teacher do?”

“Right... I didn’t anticipate this, so I didn’t really tell you about that.”

After the summons, Becker had taught Zenos the basics of structuring lessons for healing magic and what they should cover, but he hadn’t really covered what the role of a homeroom teacher was supposed to be. While they waited, he briefly explained that the position entailed looking after the members of a class, including handling their nonacademic matters.

“This is a bit of a predicament,” Becker lamented. “I’d like to give you a more detailed explanation, but I need to return to the Royal Institute soon...”

“Oh, it’s fine. I’ll figure it out.”

“I would beg to differ, but coming from you, that’s strangely reassuring.” Becker interlaced his fingers and stared at the empty sofa. “For some reason, I feel like he had that same kind of air about him, even though I shouldn’t be able to remember him anymore.”

“You’re talking about my mentor, huh...” It was true that his mentor had often spoken in a nonchalant but oddly reassuring manner. After a brief silence, Zenos continued, “Becker, I should thank you. That journal you told me about... My search for it allowed me to confront my past and reconnect with people dear to me. You even came here with me today. I’ll handle the rest, I promise.”

“But, Zenos—”

Before Becker could continue, the reception room’s door burst open.

“Hmph. You’re finally here,” came a high-pitched voice. A beautiful girl briskly walked in, all bright chestnut curls and slightly upturned, fierce eyes that hinted at her strength of will.



“Do I know you?” Zenos asked.

“Wh-What?!” the girl demanded. “You forgot about *me*?”

“I’m just kidding. Your entrance was very sudden, so I was confused for a moment, but I remember every patient I’ve ever treated. Glad to see your injury is fully healed.”

“R-Right,” the girl stammered, bringing a hand to her cheek and pressing her lips together.

This was the beloved daughter of Lord Fennel, a young lady of one of the seven great noble houses—Charlotte Fennel, the girl Zenos had once performed surgery on to remove a facial tumor.

It would’ve been odd to have a chaperone follow him around indefinitely, so Zenos had somewhat forcefully reassured the anxious Becker that he’d be fine. He’d come this far—there was no point in trying to resist anymore.

After parting ways with Becker, Zenos toured the school with Charlotte, whose shimmering, lustrous locks swayed with every step. “It’s an honor to become a teacher at an academy this prestigious, is it not?” she asked proudly.

“Well, I do think it’s a rare opportunity,” Zenos agreed.

Charlotte chuckled. “You should be grateful to me. Awfully grateful.”

“To you? How come?”

“Why, because I personally requested that my father—”

“Did you, now?”

Charlotte waved her hands in slight panic. “N-No, not at all. I misspoke. I definitely did not wish to see you again! Do not misunderstand this. Who do you think I am?”

“R-Right...” Zenos didn’t really understand what this was about, but she’d denied it with such vehemence...

“I-It was a simple mercy bestowed upon you by my father because of the surgery,” she declared huffily, turning her head away. “I told him it was

unnecessary, but he insisted! So, *reluctantly*, I allowed your appointment as teacher. Reluctantly, I tell you! Reluctantly!”

“I see...”

The only connection Zenos had with Lord Fennel was his daughter’s surgery, which indeed seemed to have been the catalyst for this whole thing. Lord Fennel was known as a moderate, but he had to be a man of great honor if he was willing to go out of his way to elevate a mere assistant who’d taken part in his daughter’s procedure.

“And you should be grateful that I’m showing you around the academy,” she added. “Moved to tears, I would say.”

“I do appreciate it, yeah,” Zenos said with a smile, and Charlotte once again turned her head away incredibly quickly.

Zenos knew he wasn’t exactly welcome here, but it was nevertheless somewhat reassuring to have a familiar face around. He kept up with Charlotte’s brisk pace as they continued their tour, passing through a dining hall—more like a banquet hall, really—lined with chandeliers, a library boasting mountains of books, a vast playground, and even an opera house. Everything was dizzyingly luxurious. What was this place, a palace?

Zenos had come here to learn about the basics of education so he could establish a school in the slums, but everything was on such a different level that he was beginning to think this experience might not be very helpful after all.

“This place’s incredible,” he remarked. “It’s so vast that if you got lost, you’d never find your way out.”

“Oh, don’t exaggerate. All schools are like this.”

Absolutely not, he thought to himself. Reality as the daughter of one of the seven great nobles and reality for everyone else were two very different things. In fact, as they walked together, students who passed them by—all of them nobles themselves—would greet her respectfully, saying, “Good day, Lady Charlotte.” Even here she held a privileged position.

As they continued down the hallway, the atmosphere gradually changed. The decorations on the ceiling and walls seemed somewhat haphazard, the lighting

grew dimmer, and the air felt stagnant.

Charlotte pointed ahead. “Beyond here is Class F, which you’ll be the homeroom teacher for. It’s also my current class.”

“Right...” According to what Becker had told Zenos, Ledelucia Academy had upper nobles in Class A, middling nobles in Classes B and C, and lower nobles in Classes D and E. Becker hadn’t known anything about Class F, so Zenos didn’t either beyond what the vice principal had said. “I hear it’s been established only recently.”

“The new headmaster created it this year, yes.”

“What kind of class is it?” Zenos asked. “Is it for children from the seven great noble houses?” Charlotte was in the class, after all.

Charlotte gave an exasperated sigh. “What are you talking about? F is below E, so the class is obviously for lower-ranked nobles.”

“What? But—”

“Naturally, I belong in Class A. In fact, if I didn’t, nobody would,” she declared with the confidence and pride only a member of the ruling class could have.

“R-Right...”

Becker’s words suddenly echoed in Zenos’s mind. *“Your students may be children, but they are also nobles. Be careful in your interactions with them.”* The girl standing before him was at the top of the noble hierarchy.

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders wearily. “You really don’t know anything, do you? At this academy, Class A members are required to attend other classes for limited periods of time to act as model students. We allow lower and middling nobles to breathe the same air as us so that they may naturally learn elegance and grace.”

“That’s some confidence you have!”

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing. So...you’re temporarily in Class F, basically.” Still, he wondered why someone as prideful as Charlotte would’ve chosen a classroom in such a dreary place, even if only for a limited time.

“I missed a month of school due to the growth on my cheek,” she explained. “The others in Class A were growing suspicious. Class F is quite far from Class A, so I don’t run into them as often. I simply want to keep my distance until the dust settles. I-It has nothing to do with the fact that it’s easier to hire temporary teachers for Class F or anything!”

Zenos didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure what she’d meant by that last statement, but it sounded like she didn’t want her classmates to know that she’d been treated for a facial tumor.

As he glanced out the window at the neatly arranged verdant trees in the back lawn, he saw something odd: a female student was crawling on all fours near one of the many shrubberies scattered about.

“What is she doing?” he asked, pointing at the strange sight. “Is that some sort of nobility ritual?”

Charlotte looked over. “Of course not!” she exclaimed, flinging the window open. “Hey! Ilya! What are you doing?!”

The girl, Ilya, quickly stood up. She had dark-brown hair in pigtails and looked more like a townspeople than a noblewoman. “Oh, Lady Charlotte! I was just looking for something...”

“A lady must not behave so disgracefully! Get back to the classroom!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Zenos stared as the embarrassed girl bowed her head repeatedly and left. “Uh...”

“She’s in Class F,” Charlotte explained. “I swear, everyone in that class is such a headache. They’re breathing the same air as I am! They should improve their behavior, if you ask me.”

“Problem class, huh,” Zenos blurted out.

Charlotte nodded as though it were obvious. “Why, of course. I told you, Class F is below Class E. It’s a gathering of unruly troublemakers among the nobility who couldn’t even make it to E. Well, not that that concerns me.”

Zenos followed after Charlotte as she began walking and asked, “Hey, what

about the previous homeroom teacher of Class F? What happened to 'em?"

"Your predecessor supposedly gave up and just stopped coming at some point. Everyone is so irresponsible! The students *and* the teachers are all walking headaches."

"Wait, 'teachers'? Multiple?"

Charlotte looked over her shoulder and blinked, her long lashes fluttering. "Indeed. You're the fifth homeroom teacher for Class F."

"Come, let's go inside."

Zenos followed Charlotte into Class F. Though the classroom's interior was far more impressive than his clinic, it was nevertheless poorly lit—likely because the window faced north, not allowing much sunlight in. According to Charlotte, this place had originally been used as a storage room.

There were fewer than ten students within, making the class smaller than Zenos had anticipated. No one said anything, but he could feel their weary, inquisitive gazes turning his way.

"This is the new homeroom teacher," Charlotte announced to the class before turning to Zenos. "Go on. Say something."

Zenos stepped onto the podium and scanned his eyes over the students. Some were looking down, some out the window, and others were glaring at him. He took a breath, deciding to keep his introduction simple.

"The Royal Institute of Healing has sent me here as your interim teacher. Call me Xeno." No one responded. He clearly wasn't welcome, though that wasn't surprising. "Now, then..." Zenos placed both hands on the desk, looking over the class once more. "Class dismissed."

"Wait!" Charlotte exclaimed, flustered. "What are you doing, dismissing them all of a sudden?!"

"Shouldn't I have? Everyone looked pretty done already."

Murmurs erupted in the previously quiet room.

“J-Just come with me for a moment!” Charlotte took Zenos by the arm and dragged him out into the hallway. “What are you thinking? You’re the homeroom teacher!”

“I mean, what did you expect? I didn’t know I was going to be the homeroom teacher until a few minutes ago. I’ve never done anything like this before, so I don’t really know what to do.”

“W-Well, that was papa’s decision, not mine!”

“Yes, you said that earlier.”

“Still, you should have a general idea of what to do, no? Have you not received basic education?”

“Unfortunately, the education I received was quite...unique.”

“Oh, right. You came from abroad, didn’t you?”

“It may as well be considered a different country, yes.”

Charlotte sighed. “Listen. First, you take attendance. There’s an attendance sheet on your desk. Then, you make announcements if there are any. Goodness, why do I have to explain this to you?”

“It’s a big help. Thanks.”

“I-I’m simply doing this as the class representative! It’s not for your sake!” she declared, pointing sharply at him for some reason.

The two went back to the classroom and Charlotte took her seat in the back by the window. Following her instructions, Zenos took the attendance sheet from the desk and began calling out names. “All right, I’ll begin taking attendance now. Ilya Clavel?”

“O-Oh! Here!” replied a girl in the front row, looking up—the same girl who’d been crawling around in the back lawn earlier. Her timid demeanor made her look like a small, frightened animal. Zenos had always thought all nobles behaved haughtily, so seeing someone like her was a surprise.

“Next is...Charlotte Fennel,” he continued.

“Y-You have no right to not include my title when addressing me!” Charlotte

protested.

“Uh. Right.” She was the one who’d told him to take attendance in the first place, but whatever. Zenos called out a few more names, receiving lackluster replies at best, then called, “Ryan Dasz.”

“Yep,” replied a male student with short bronze hair and a large frame. He was sitting back, arms crossed, his posture defiant—in a way typical of a noble, Zenos supposed. “Wonder if you’re gonna make it here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our homeroom teachers just keep dropping like flies for some reason.”

“Right, yeah. I was told I’m the fifth. I plan to stick it out for the duration of the term, though.”

Ryan smirked, arms still crossed. “Hah! Good luck to you.”

Zenos responded with a smile of his own. “Thank you. I’ll do what I can.”

“I wasn’t actually encouraging you!” Ryan shouted.

Zenos moved on to the last name on the list. “Eleanor Freysard.”

The girl, sitting in the corner, didn’t respond. She had deep crimson hair reaching down to her shoulders and wore long sleeves despite it being summer. Her gaze was cold, hostile almost. Still, she was present, so he marked her as attending.

Zenos could tell this class wouldn’t be easy to handle, but since he’d never been to school before, he figured that might be the norm. Perhaps students were naturally confrontational and the conflict resulted in mutual growth? At the orphanage, any sort of defiance toward the instructors had been strictly forbidden. This was rather new to him.

“Hmm?” As Zenos tried to put the attendance sheet back under the desk, he felt a sharp pain shoot through his fingertip. Blood oozed out of a small cut on his skin. He peered underneath and found a knife lying there, blade exposed. Quiet giggles echoed around the classroom.

“What happened?” Charlotte asked, furrowing her brows.

“Oh, nothing. There’s a knife in there,” Zenos replied calmly. “Did someone leave it behind?”

“What do you mean? Why would anyone leave a knife behind?” Charlotte stood up, looking around the classroom. “Obviously someone planted it there on purpose!”

“Someone did? Huh. So students really do challenge their teachers in school.”

“They do not!”

Zenos laughed. “This is pretty mild, though.”

“What?”

“I mean, I’ve been nearly beheaded with an axe, shot at with a magical gun... Someone just leaving a knife here is almost cute by comparison. Anyway, the injury’s already healed, so...” Zenos raised his uninjured finger.

“Wh-What the...”

The classroom was now abuzz with whispers.

Zenos placed his hand on the desk and once again surveyed the room. “All right. Since I’ve taken the role of your teacher, I’ll abide by the rules of this place. I welcome your challenges. Come at me with everything you’ve got, and I’ll return the favor with everything I’ve got.”

“W-Wait, what in blazes are you going on about?!”

Watching the students, who’d grown even more restless than before, Zenos said, “Now, then. Class dismissed.”

“No, really, what is happening here?!” Charlotte demanded, her cries of protest drowned out by the sound of the morning chime echoing throughout the academy.

After the morning assembly ended, Zenos sat at his desk in the corner of the faculty room. The man at the desk across from him stood up and extended a muscular arm.

“Are you the new teacher, Mr. Xeno?” The man looked to be in his early

thirties, with neatly groomed brown hair and a pleasant smile. “I’m Hanks Elner, the homeroom teacher for the first-year Class D. I teach martial arts. It’s a pleasure.”

“Just Xeno is fine,” Zenos replied, shaking the man’s hand. “Technically I’m here to teach healing magic.”

“You’re already the talk of the academy,” Hanks said with admiration in his tone. “Word is you immediately declared war on Class F.”

“Uh, I did...?” He’d only done what had seemed appropriate. Declaring war hadn’t been his intention.

Hanks laughed heartily. “Well, perhaps a strong approach like that is exactly what they need. I’ve had my fair share of trouble with those students too.”

Zenos asked for details and Hanks told him that Class F had been created under the new headmaster’s orders. It was a gathering of problem students originally from classes D and E, which were attended by lower-ranking nobles.

“Do schools usually gather all the problem students in one place like that?” Zenos asked.

“Well, the official reasoning was that the classes were split to better suit students’ needs,” Hanks said in a hushed tone, not wanting the others to hear. “You’re the fifth teacher to take charge of Class F, Xeno. Watch your back.”

“I heard about the fifth teacher thing. Why did the other four quit?”

“I don’t know the details, but apparently all the others suddenly vanished, as if they’d run off in the night. Perhaps they were being harassed.” Hanks gave a soft sigh before continuing, “Honestly, I don’t know how I feel about the way Class F was formed. It reeks of trying to sweep problems under the rug. But since it was a direct order from the headmaster, neither the staff nor the parents can do much about it.”

“Huh...” The headmaster had been away, so Zenos hadn’t met him. Still, all the students in Class F were nobles, right? Lower-ranking, sure, but nobles. Which made their parents noble as well. Who was this headmaster that even they wouldn’t dare cross?

Hanks blinked in surprise. “Wait, you didn’t know? The new headmaster is the heir to House Baycladd, one of the seven great noble houses. He’s also an alumnus of this academy, and graduated at the top of his class.”

That evening, Zenos returned to the staff dorms at the edge of the academy grounds.

The teachers at the academy were a mix of people from noble and commoner backgrounds. Upper classes were mostly taught by noble-born teachers, whereas the lower classes were primarily taught by common-born ones. The dorm where he was staying with Lily seemed to be the one designated for the commoners—the segregation happened because differences in social class were deeply ingrained into Herzeth’s society. Naturally, the poor weren’t even part of this equation; to Zenos, even the commoners’ dorm looked quite impressive.

“Welcome back, Zenos,” Lily said when Zenos opened the door, her slippers pattering against the floor as she walked over to greet him. “Would you like dinner? A bath? Or perhaps...me?”

He’d heard that exact line before at the dorms in the Royal Institute of Healing. She’d been playing the role of his little sister back then too. “I don’t think that’s something a little sister would say, Lily.”

“Boo...”

Behind Lily was Carmilla, floating in midair. “So, did you survive your first day?”

“You were assuming I wouldn’t, weren’t you? Stop that.”

A short while later, Zenos sat at the dining table and recounted the events of the day to the pair.

“Wow,” Lily exclaimed in shock. “Are you sure you’ll be okay teaching that class, Zenos?”

Carmilla clutched her stomach with laughter. “‘I’ll return the favor with everything I’ve got,’ Zenos? Really? You never fail to amuse.”

Zenos rested his chin on his hand, pursing his lips slightly. “Look, I can’t help it, all right? I don’t know much about schools! I thought that’s how things were supposed to go!”

“So, to recap, we have a lady from one of the seven great noble houses, a suspicious girl, a cocky boy who is practically set up to be the comic relief/villain, and a taciturn red-haired girl with a death glare. And on top of that, the headmaster is an influential man from yet another of the seven great noble houses. An interesting ensemble indeed.”

“You know, I’m kinda jealous of how you’re always enjoying yourself.” And what did “set up to be the comic relief/villain” even mean?

Zenos went on to explain that after morning assembly he’d taught a healing magic class to Class F as well, and felt constant gazes boring into his back. His declaration of war might have started off their relationship on the entirely wrong foot.

“So, what are your prospects on learning anything about the all-important process of schooling?” Carmilla asked.

“Well...” Zenos crossed his arms, groaning.

His plan had been to observe the other classes in his free time to learn what was taught there and how, and he’d even made this request in advance. The only problem was that the high-handed vice principal had—after reprimanding Zenos severely for his declaration of war—taken up said free time with burdensome menial tasks like organizing old documents and repairing damaged areas of the school building.

When Zenos had reiterated his request to observe other classes, he’d been told they couldn’t allow someone of unknown background to freely access the classrooms. And, well, given that Zenos’s background was indeed suspicious at best, he’d had no argument against that.

“Why don’t we have Carmilla attend classes in your stead, Zenos?” Lily suggested, clapping her hands. The plan was to have Carmilla hide in the staff, which would be placed somewhere inconspicuous inside the classrooms, allowing the wraith to listen in on the lessons. Carmilla could then share what she learned with Zenos and the others afterward.

The wraith didn't seem too enthusiastic about the idea, however. "Hmm. I *am* somewhat interested, yes, but staying inside the staff for long periods of time is quite hard on my body. I get very stiff, you see."

"You don't even have a body," Zenos pointed out.

There was also Zenos's colleague Hanks, who was easy to talk to, but asking the man to explain basic education from the ground up would have been a bit much.

Chin still in hand, Zenos mumbled absentmindedly, "Is there anyone out there who could teach me...?"

The following week passed with Zenos taking attendance, teaching the basics of healing magic, and completing the chores assigned to him by the vice principal. The students in Class F remained distant and, at times, hostile.

Charlotte occasionally interacted with him, but since she was technically in Class A, she didn't seem interested in making friends with her current classmates.

"This sucks," Zenos said with a sigh during his lunch break. He sat on a bench on the back lawn, eating the lunch Lily had prepared for him and reflecting on the situation.

He'd come to the academy to learn the fundamentals of education so he could eventually establish a school in the slums, but with no opportunity to observe other classes, things weren't going to plan at all.

"What are you doing over there?" asked a girl as she approached him, her glossy chestnut hair swaying in the wind.

"Oh, hey, Charlotte."

"What do you mean, 'oh, hey'? I went out of my way to talk to you! You should be pleased."

"I see you every day, though."

"Which you should thank the heavens for!" Charlotte proudly placed her right hand on her chest. Her sense of self-worth was innate, it seemed.

Zenos took a bite of his herbed grilled fish, then said, “The vice principal told me to clean the back lawn. It’s so big that I spent the whole morning at it and barely covered about a tenth of the whole thing.”

“He told you to clean the back lawn? Is that not a job for the groundskeeper? A teacher shouldn’t be doing that.”

“So this isn’t standard, then?” Zenos had no idea what was considered normal for a teacher. What *was* a teacher supposed to be, really? Someone who got challenged by students? Someone who handled miscellaneous tasks?

Charlotte’s lips curled into a slight frown. “Shall I speak to my father for you? I could ask him to make sure you don’t get saddled with any more menial work.”

Zenos pondered this in silence for a moment, then shook his head. “I appreciate the sentiment, but it’s all right.”

“You’re refusing my offer?” Charlotte asked, shocked.

“Well, I *am* a teacher, sort of. I can’t just get a student to help me out for free. And I doubt there’s anything I could offer you in return that you don’t already have, so...”

Charlotte pursed her lips in displeasure, clearly not having expected the refusal. She took a few deep breaths, then pointed a delicate finger at Zenos’s lunch box. “What’s with that lunch, anyway? You’re eating such a plebeian meal.”

“Is that a problem?”

“I could ask our butler to prepare something more luxurious.”

“You know, Charlotte...” Zenos trailed off for a moment, fork in hand, then looked up at the girl. “I like this lunch. You may have everything, but more luxurious isn’t always better. When you offer something to someone, you should consider whether they’ll actually appreciate it.”

“What...?” Charlotte’s demeanor and tone changed; her fingertip trembled slightly, and her snow-white complexion was now flushed pink. “A-Are you trying to *lecture* me...?”

“I wouldn’t call it a lecture, exactly—”

“Not even papa scolds me! Not one teacher has ever chastised me! How...unpleasant!”

“What?”

Charlotte squared her shoulders, turned around, and walked away.

“Uh. Okay...”

Becker’s words rang in Zenos’s mind. “*Your students may be children, but they are also nobles. Be careful in your interactions with them.*” He’d thought he was being mindful, but apparently the elite healer’s concerns were already becoming a reality.

“Teaching sure is rough, master...” Zenos muttered, pressing a hand to his forehead as he watched Charlotte’s retreating figure disappear into the school building. He’d only been here a week, but this was already proving to be more than he’d bargained for. Why had his mentor gone to such lengths to teach children he didn’t even know?

A strange sight caught his attention, interrupting the flurry of thoughts: a female student was crouched on the ground in front of a nearby bush.

“Uh, Ilya?” Zenos called out.

“Y-Yes?!” replied the girl—who normally sat in the front row of Class F—as she hurriedly pushed to her feet. She brushed the dirt off her uniform, speaking nervously. “Oh, Mr. Xeno! What are you doing here?”

“That’s what I should be asking. What are *you* doing? Weren’t you doing this exact same thing before?”

Ilya gave him an anxious look. “Um... I’m looking for something.”

“Like what, nuts? Sadly, that’s a tarkana tree. The nuts are thorny, hard, and bitter. You’d have a very hard time eating them.”

“O-Oh, you’re very knowledgeable! Have you actually eaten those nuts before?”

“I tried all sorts of nuts as a kid,” he informed her. “So, what are you looking for?”

“All sorts of nuts...?” Ilya echoed, puzzled. “Oh, um, I... I was looking for my textbook.”

“Your textbook? Do those fall from trees like nuts?”

The usually timid girl let out a small laugh at that. “No, of course not! That was a really funny joke, Mr. Xeno.”

“R-Right, yeah, a joke. Of course they don’t fall from trees. Ha ha...ha...ha.” Zenos nodded, trying to cover up his awkwardness. “So, why are you looking for your textbook over there?”

“I...” Ilya hesitated and trailed off, just standing there silently.

A group of students from another class, approaching from the opposite direction, noticed Ilya and stopped.

“Hey, that’s Ilya over there.”

“What’s she doing here?”

“She’s probably looking for her textbook again.”

“Right, yeah. Not that studying would help her any. I’m sure a kind soul threw it out in the lawn for her.”

Ilya lowered her head in silence, clenching her fists tightly. Zenos moved to stand, but then a large male student emerged from the shadow of the school building.

“Move,” he snapped, glaring at the group of students like a mad beast. “You’re in my way.” Reluctantly, the other students stepped aside, allowing the male student—Ryan, from Class F—to walk through the middle.

“Hmph,” one of the students muttered. “Failure.”

“What did you say?” Ryan demanded, grabbing the other student by the collar.

Undaunted, the other student replied, “Did I stutter? You’re a failure in your family and you’re a failure who flunked out of Class E.”

“Shut your damn mouth!” Ryan shouted, shoving the other student harshly.

The student fell dramatically, landing hands down on the ground. “He pushed

me!” the student protested, his palms now scraped and oozing blood. “Look, I’m injured! Expel him, someone!”

“What’s going on here?” asked Hanks, the Class D homeroom teacher, running over after hearing the commotion. He made eye contact with Zenos for a moment before kneeling beside the fallen student. “What happened?”

“Ryan attacked me!” the student wailed. “Look, I’m hurt! Get him expelled!”

Hanks examined the fallen student’s hands carefully. “I don’t see any injuries.”

“Huh? What...?” The student stared at his uninjured palms, tilting his head in confusion. “H-How? I was bleeding just a second ago!”

“Say what you will, but there’s nothing there. Now, move along.”

At Hanks’s urging, the group of students reluctantly made their way back to their own classroom. Ryan watched them go, then looked at Zenos, clicked his tongue in irritation, and left.

“Was that the right decision...?” Now alone, Zenos put away his lunch and pushed to his feet. He’d healed the injured student in an instant, and Ryan hadn’t been accused of anything as a result—but the fact remained the unruly Class F student *had* shoved the other boy down. Still, Ryan’s intervention had stopped the bullying directed at Ilya, and so Zenos had instinctively intervened.

Ilya watched Ryan’s retreating figure with a guilty expression.

“Hey, Ilya. Are those guys—”

“Oh, it’s fine! It’s fine,” Ilya interjected, cutting Zenos off and shaking her head vigorously. “But um, Mr. Xeno, did you...heal that student just now?”

“Why do you ask?”

“B-Because, on your first day, you healed your hand immediately. I figure it must’ve been you...”

That’s surprisingly sharp of her, Zenos mused quietly, unsure of how to respond.

Before he could, Ilya gathered her courage and spoke again. “U-Um, Mr.

Xeno! C-Could you please tutor me in healing magic?”

There was a brief moment of silence as a warm breeze stirred the nearby trees. Zenos cast a thoughtful glance at the timid Ilya as she fidgeted with her fingers.

“You want me to teach you healing magic?”

“Y-Yes. W-Would that not be possible...?”

“I’m already teaching it in class.”

“Yes, but, um, I’d like to learn to cast the spells themselves...”

It was true that in class, Zenos mainly explained the basic structure and functions of the human body. He hadn’t actually taught healing magic itself yet. This was because, according to Becker, nobles weren’t expected to become healers—and so what Zenos had been teaching was considered sufficient. In fact, Hanks had shown him the academy’s curriculum, and that didn’t include healing magic either.

“Why do you want to learn it, anyway?”

“Um... I’m just interested in it,” she mumbled quietly.

Zenos scratched his cheek thoughtfully. “Well, it’s not that I *can’t* teach it, but not everyone has the mana needed for it...”

“I-I see... Right...” Ilya’s shoulders slumped, and she slowly started to walk away.

Watching her go, Zenos was struck by a sudden idea. “Wait!”

“Huh?” Ilya stopped, turning back to Zenos with a puzzled expression.

“Have you been formally educated, Ilya?”

“Um, yes. I know the basics, at least...”

Zenos cleared his throat. “I could give you private lessons in healing magic after school.”

“R-Really?!”

“But,” he continued, raising a finger, “in exchange, could you teach me... Er,

not me. Could you teach a family member of mine those basics?"

Chapter 3: The Common-Born Girl

After school, Zenos made his way back to the staff dorms and informed Lily and Carmilla about their guest ahead of time.

“A noble student is coming to tutor me?” Lily asked, surprised.

“Ah, so you have asked this girl to teach Lily, not you,” Carmilla remarked. “Clever.”

It would’ve been inappropriate for Zenos, given his position as a teacher, to ask for lessons for himself. Instead, he’d devised a plan to have the guest, Ilya, tutor Lily under the pretense of helping the younger girl with her studies. That would give them an opportunity to learn what basic education entailed.

“Unexpectedly quick thinking for you,” Carmilla concluded.

“I’m not sure that was a compliment,” Zenos muttered. “But oh well. Since I don’t know how long we’ll be here, I figured I may as well make the most of whatever time we have.”

“What do you mean?” Lily asked, puzzled, and Zenos explained he’d upset Charlotte. “Charlotte? Oh, that girl from one of the seven great noble houses?”

“Yeah...” Zenos had not only managed to upset one of the few people he knew at the academy, but the person whose father wielded immense power. His role as a teacher here, it seemed, was hanging by a thread.

“Aw, is it over already?” Carmilla lamented. “How dull.”

“Sorry to ruin your fun.”

“I have yet to even enact the first of the seven mysteries I have devised for the academy: a piano that plays by itself in the empty music room.”

“*That’s* what you’re worried about, you floaty jerk?!”

After their pointless exchange, there was a soft knock on the door. Lily quickly put on earmuffs to conceal her elven heritage, and Carmilla vanished from sight.

Zenos opened the door. “Hey, Ilya. Thanks for coming.”

“Oh, um, g-good evening, Mr. Xeno.” The girl with braided hair stood there anxiously, a large bag in her arms.

And standing right behind Ilya, wearing a stern look, was a girl with chestnut curls.

“Charlotte?” Zenos said. “Why are you here?”

“U-Um, Lady Charlotte insisted on coming too,” Ilya explained nervously, stepping aside as Charlotte pushed forward.

“I-I wasn’t eavesdropping on your conversation from around the corner or anything!” the noblewoman declared, marching into the room and pointing sharply at Zenos. “And why did you not run after me to apologize? Unbelievable!”

“Uh...”

“Well, I’ve gone out of my way to give you a chance to redeem yourself. You should be grateful! Be good and apologize and I might overlook your rudeness this once.”

Lily cast a quiet, anxious glance at Zenos.

The healer scratched his head, then replied, “I don’t think I’ve said anything wrong, so I’m not going to apologize.”

“What...?!”

“But I don’t like seeing you upset and would like you to feel better.” Zenos walked to the attached kitchen and brewed some tea using Lily’s favorite leaves, then handed Charlotte a cup. “You came all this way, so the least I can do is be a good host.”

“You expect me to drink *this*?”

“I told you. Luxurious doesn’t always mean better. It wouldn’t hurt to try something ‘plebeian’ for a change. But of course, I won’t force you to drink if you don’t want to.”

Charlotte glanced at Lily, then down at the steaming cup of tea. She hesitated

for a moment, then accepted the cup and took a cautious sip. Slowly, she looked back up. “Q-Quite delicious.”

“Right? It may not be gourmet, but our resident expert picked out the leaves herself. You can’t go wrong with it.”

Charlotte took another sip of her tea, her prickly demeanor seeming to soften somewhat.

“See? You’re much cuter when you’re in a good mood.”

The noble girl’s hand froze as her cheeks quickly turned red. “Wh-What? Wh-Wh-What are you saying?!”

Zenos attempted to explain, “Wait, that wasn’t me who said—”

“I-I-I suppose I could be magnanimous this once. Be grateful!” With that, Charlotte took a seat in one of the chairs in the living room as though she owned the place. “So, where are your chambers? Take me there, now.”

“Um... We’re staying right here,” Lily replied.

Shocked, Charlotte looked around. “Surely you jest? My pet rabbit’s hutch is bigger than this.”

“Wow! Your house sounds amazing!”

While the two girls continued their exchange, Zenos walked over to the staff leaning against a corner of the room. “It was *you* just now, wasn’t it?”

Carmilla chuckled from within the staff. “With excellent results, I might add. Worry not, Zenos. You are a natural-born lady-killer. I simply gave you a little push.”

“What do you mean, ‘natural-born lady-killer’?”

“U-Um. Er...” Unable to follow the exchanges, Ilya stood blankly in the doorway. Zenos called out to her and she finally snapped back to reality, lifting her large bag up to her chest. “W-Well, then, let’s begin our studies.”

Ilya overturned her bag on the table and a pile of books tumbled out. “I brought a full set of elementary school textbooks,” she explained.

“Ooh.”

“Wow...”

As Zenos and Lily gazed at the textbooks with admiration, Charlotte interjected from her seat at the table, resting her chin on her hands. “What’s so special about elementary school books?”

To her, they might not have seemed like much, but to those hailing from the slums, these books may as well have been treasures.

Ilya sat down on a chair, then looked at Lily. “Um, this is the girl I’ll be tutoring, right? Is she your sister?”

“No, I’m his wife.”

“Huh?”

“Lily, let’s not say weird things to people you’ve only just met, yes?” Zenos chastised. “It could cause all sorts of problems.”

“Boo...”

“Oh! It was a joke,” Ilya said, pressing a hand to her chest in relief. “I was a little startled...”

For now, the plan was to make it look like Lily was the one being tutored while Zenos listened in to learn as well.

“I’m looking forward to learning, miss!” Lily exclaimed, energetically raising her hand.

“Sh-She’s so cute,” Ilya murmured. “Um, I’d be happy to teach you. Is there a subject in particular you struggle with?”

“Everything! Please teach me all the subjects!”

“E-Everything? A-All right, then. Let’s go in order, starting with math...” Slightly overwhelmed by Lily’s eagerness, Ilya opened a textbook.

A bored-looking Charlotte pushed to her feet and began to wander around the room, though she didn’t seem inclined to leave. After a while, she sat down in front of the staff leaning against the wall, staring at it intently.

“Hmm. What an old-fashioned staff,” she mused derisively.

“Boo!”

“E-Eek!” Charlotte shrieked, falling back on her rear.



“Charlotte, what happened?” Zenos asked.

“Th-The staff just spoke!”

“You must be imagining it! Ha ha...ha.” Zenos forced a nervous laugh as he shot the staff a sharp glare.

Over at the table, Ilya’s lesson was progressing smoothly. “Yes, that’s correct! Wow, you’re learning so quickly!”

“It’s because you’re such a great teacher!” Lily exclaimed with a proud little laugh. The young elf was a smart girl to begin with, but Ilya’s teaching method was exceptionally effective, making the subject easy to grasp.

As the lesson came to a pause, Zenos turned to Ilya and asked, “Hey, Ilya, can I ask you a question?”

“Y-Yes. What is it?”

“The other students were talking about someone throwing your textbook out on the back lawn. Is that true?” This had been on his mind since earlier; she hadn’t been rummaging through the shrubberies because of some weird ritual, but rather to search for her missing textbook.

“Th-That’s right. It happened once before, and I found them discarded near the bushes. They’ve gone missing again, so I figured maybe that’s where they were...” She looked down, her words hesitant. “My family were commoners originally. My father was elevated into nobility, but because we’re newcomers, people haven’t been very accepting...”

In Herzeth, the royal family and nobility held overwhelming power and influence, but there were a few ways for civilians to become nobles. One way was to reach Black Class, the highest possible rank for an adventurer. Another was to become the head of a national institution, such as the Royal Institute of Healing. Yet another was to contribute a certain level of wealth to the country. Ilya explained that, compared to methods like the first two, which involved significant achievements, becoming a noble through wealth was not as well regarded.

Suddenly, her lack of a typical noble’s demeanor made sense. Her commoner

background was likely also the reason why she—despite not seeming like a problem student—had ended up placed in the delinquent Class F.

Charlotte, who had been keeping a noticeable distance from the staff, interjected, “How pathetic. You’re a target because you act like a frightened rabbit.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“Just buy a thousand textbooks. Then people couldn’t easily throw them all away.”

Wow. The mindset of the wealthy was truly something else.

“B-But that would be so wasteful...”

“I think you and I will get along, Ilya.”

“H-Hey! What do you mean by that?!” Charlotte demanded, looking at Zenos.

“Hee hee hee...”

Zenos decided to feign not having heard that laugh.

For someone coming from the dregs of society like him, the lives of the nobility seemed completely out of reach, like something from an entirely different world. However, it seemed like even after becoming nobles, people still had to potentially deal with a whole new social ladder. It boggled his mind.

“Social ladders, huh...” Zenos mused aloud.

“What are you going on about?” Charlotte asked.

“Oh, nothing. Anyway, I think it’s about time to start the healing magic lessons, yeah?” Zenos said, standing up and motioning for Ilya to come to the space beside the table.

“Y-Yes, please!” a nervous-looking Ilya exclaimed.

“You do have mana, right?” Without it, one couldn’t use magic.

“Oh! Yes! I remember being told I had some during my secondary school evaluation.”

“Well, I don’t have any!” Charlotte said as she strode over, crossing her arms

with an inexplicable air of superiority. “But I have beauty, wealth, power, and dancing skills.”

“Right. I remember something about you really enjoying dancing at balls.” Zenos recalled that, when he’d visited her home for her facial tumor surgery, he’d seen that the walls in Charlotte’s room were lined with images of her dancing at various balls.

“Well, if you *really* would like to see me dance, I might just give you a demonstration.”

“Maybe another time.”

“A-At least show *some* interest!”

The staff in the corner trembled with suppressed laughter.

Zenos advised the tense Ilya to relax and began teaching her how to manifest her mana, carefully explaining the steps as he recalled his mentor’s teachings.

Ilya held her hands out in front of her and took several deep breaths. After a few moments, a faint, hazy light manifested in her palms.

“Oh! U-Um, Mr. Xeno!” she exclaimed, startled.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Zenos replied gently. “Just like that.”

Charlotte, arms still crossed, narrowed her eyes. “That’s her mana? It seems weak.”

“This is normal for a beginner,” Zenos explained. “Once her output stabilizes and she’s able to sustain it longer, this spark will ignite her magic.”

“I would like to inform you once again that I may not have mana, but I *do* have beauty, wealth, power, and dancing skills.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Listen to what I’m saying!”

The staff did not laugh this time.

Perhaps due to her intense concentration, Ilya began to grow quite tired, and Zenos ended the lesson for the day. He escorted both a slightly miffed Charlotte and an apologetic Ilya to the dorm’s entrance and saw them off.

Upon returning to the room, he saw Lily and Carmilla standing there with serious expressions, and tilted his head. “What’s wrong with you two?”

“Zenos... Ilya was able to manifest her mana just now, right?” Lily asked.

“Yeah. At a beginner level, anyway.”

Behind the young elf, Carmilla shook her head. “You really know nothing, do you? Geniuses are so clueless.”

“What are you talking about?”

“No ordinary person could produce mana immediately after being taught just a few basics. Normally, it would take months. Years, for some.”

“Huh? Really?”

Zenos thought back to his orphanage days. It was true that it had taken him years to manifest the white light surrounding the bodies of the deceased he’d tried to revive. But back then he hadn’t known much about magic, and had been doing it by himself. After meeting his mentor and learning the correct technique, his mana output had doubled in just one day.

“’Tis a mistake for you to measure her progress based on your personal experience. You almost cast a resurrection spell all on your own, and even mastered protective and enhancement magic without any guidance besides having been taught healing magic. None of that is normal. But that girl...”

The apex undead glanced at the closed door and gave a sly smile.

“I had thought her a mere background character, but she might actually be quite the fascinating one...”

“G-Good evening, Mr. Xeno,” said Ilya as she came by Zenos’s dorm room again after school the next day. The visit spoke to her determination, given how exhausted she’d been the day before.

“And you’re here again too,” Zenos pointed out.

“What? Do you have a problem with that?” Charlotte asked, barging into the room as though it were her own. “You should be crying with joy instead.”

“I mean, you can come if you want. I just thought being here would be boring for you.”

A young lady of one of the seven great noble houses must be busy, Zenos figured. He doubted she had much to gain from watching Ilya teach Lily the basics, or watching Zenos teach Ilya healing magic.

Charlotte took a seat on a chair in the living room, resting her cheek on her hand and staring off into the distance. “Hmph. I’m not bored in the slightest.”

“Well, all right, then.”

“D-Do not misunderstand. I-I haven’t come here to see you!”

“Right, of course. But...why *are* you here?”

After a brief pause, Charlotte turned her gaze to Ilya. “I-I thought I’d teach Ilya a thing or two! That girl is far too meek.”

“Huh?!” Ilya exclaimed.

“What are you making that face for? You’re not going to refuse my generosity, are you?”

“Oh! Um, n-no, not at all!” Ilya shrank into herself, bowing her head in true meek fashion. “Th-Thank you...”

The staff propped up against the wall trembled slightly.

After Ilya finished tutoring Lily in elementary education, Charlotte rose to her feet in one elegant motion. “Now then, since I’m so very gracious, I will give you a special lecture on sovereignty, House Fennel-style. And you there, girl. You can listen too if you want.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Lily exclaimed, energetically raising her hand next to a listless Ilya.

Charlotte nodded in satisfaction and walked toward the window. “I am wonderful.”

“Huh?” Ilya mumbled, confused.

Gazing at her reflection in the glass, Charlotte continued, “I am wonderful. I am gorgeous. I am awe-inspiring.”

“U-Um, Lady Charlotte...? A-Are you losing your mind—”

“I am not! Very brazen of a weakling like you to say such a thing!” Charlotte snapped. With a deep sigh, she ran her fingers through her lustrous hair. “Do you not understand what I’m doing? I’m adoring myself. I keep repeating how incredible I am, and confidence will simply come to me. Easy, no?”

“U-Um, right,” a still confused Ilya replied.

“Huh...” Zenos mused. That was strength. Undeniable strength. He hated to speak of people’s social class like it mattered, but he couldn’t argue against the innate power in her upbringing.

Charlotte spun around to face Ilya. Her glossy chestnut curls arced through the air, making her look even more beautiful than before. “Now you do it, Ilya.”

“I-I am...”

“You’re *what*, girl? I can’t hear you.”

“I-I am...wonderful.”

“You’re too quiet. Do you really think yourself wonderful?”

“N-No...”

“That’s the problem.” Charlotte strode closer and gently lifted Ilya’s downcast chin.

“Ah!”

“You may not compare to me, but your face isn’t that bad. Have confidence.”

Ilya’s cheeks turned a soft pink. “Huh? Oh! Yes. Th-Thank...you...”

“Now, try again.”

“I-I am wonderful.”

“Go on.”

“I-I am gorgeous. I am...a-awe-inspiring.”

“I’m wonderful!” Lily exclaimed, joining in on the self-praise chant. “I’m gorgeous! I’m awe-inspiring!”

The atmosphere turned strangely heated, making it seem like some sort of

cult gathering.

“Hee hee hee... Needless to say that I, of course, am awe-inspiring,” a voice joined in, brimming with an absurd amount of self-esteem.

Finally, the bizarre lecture on “sovereignty” came to an end to the sound of the strange chorus.

Looking somewhat tired but satisfied, Lily lifted her head and asked, “Hey, Ilya? Why is it that you want to learn healing magic?”

“Who, me? I... Um, actually, I...want to become a healer.” A brief silence fell upon the room, and feeling the others’ gazes on her, Ilya shrank back. “I-I’m sorry. That must sound like a strange dream for someone like me...”

“I don’t think it’s strange at all,” Zenos interjected, looking Ilya in the eyes. “Everyone should have dreams. That’s what my mentor taught me.”

Ilya paused, then replied, “Your mentor must’ve been wonderful.”

“Well, he did have a lot of not-so-wonderful traits.”

“I-I was gravely ill as a child, and a healer saved me,” Ilya explained, her eyes sparkling. “He was so cool...”

At the time, her father had just become a nobleman and had been busy making courtesy visits, so she hadn’t been able to voice her wish to become a healer. Ilya had almost given up on her dream when a healer was assigned as her homeroom teacher, so she’d taken what she saw as her last chance and asked Zenos for lessons in healing magic.

Charlotte, again resting her chin on her hand, gave Ilya a sidelong glance. “Hmph. So even with all that timidity, you still managed to ask for lessons.”

“I-I didn’t think I could ask for something like that, but... Mr. Xeno isn’t as intimidating as our previous teachers...”

“Hmph. *My* dream, incidentally, is to find a man worthy of me and dance with him at our wedding.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Zenos replied.

“Hey! Homeroom teachers should listen to their students!”

“Oh, by the way...” Ilya clasped her hands together as though she’d just recalled something. Hesitantly, she continued, “I heard a rumor that you have a fiancé, Lady Charlotte. Is that true?”

“Hmm? Oh, that. It’s nothing official. Our parents made a drunken arrangement when we were children.”

“Really?!” Lily asked excitedly. “Who is he?!”

Charlotte’s answer was less than enthusiastic. “Albert Baycladd. The current headmaster of Ledelucia Academy.”

It was time for Zenos to tutor Ilya in healing magic, and he began the lesson by training her to release mana. Ilya focused on the flow of mana within her, gathering it in parts of the body that were easier to project mana from, such as her palms and fingertips.

“Yeah, that’s it. If you focus too much on projecting your mana, it’ll start leaking out from all over and you’ll run out in no time. Try to visualize storing it in one place before releasing it.”

“O-Okay!” Sweat beaded on Ilya’s forehead and she nodded, her expression serious. By the latter half of the lesson, she had gradually begun to control the flow of her mana.

“Not bad, not bad at all. So, spellcasting is primarily divided into three aspects: the amount of mana used, how well you control it, and the quality of it.”

Thinking back on his mentor’s teachings, Zenos went on to explain that the amount of mana available to a caster was largely determined by innate factors. Control, meanwhile, could be improved through training. Quality could also be refined through practice, but it was heavily influenced by the caster’s talent and aptitude. Lastly, catalysts like staves, magic circles, and chants could all be used to amplify one or more of the three aspects.

“Until you’re used to casting spells, it’ll be easier if you chant,” Zenos concluded.

“Until I’m used to it...?” Ilya echoed. “Um, isn’t chanting an essential part of spellcasting?”

“...Uh. Is it?”

“What do you mean? Oh! Right! You use magic without chants, don’t you, Mr. Xeno? Now that I’m thinking about it, I never knew that was possible...”

“Unconventional little bastard,” came an irritated voice from the staff propped against the wall.

Zenos coughed to clear his throat. “Well, anyway, for now we’ll be sticking to chanting.”

“O-Okay. *Heal!*” Ilya’s chant caused a faint light to flicker in her palm for a moment, before it gently scattered into the air. “S-Something happened!”



“Yeah. That’s healing magic.” Though at this level of output, it was barely enough to heal a small scratch.

“I’m not sure I get the point,” Charlotte interjected. “Wouldn’t it be faster to simply use some herbal medicine?”

Ilya’s shoulders slumped. “Oh... I-I suppose so...”

“No, this is actually really impressive, Ms. Ilya,” Lily pointed out. She was familiar with magic, and in her opinion, getting this far in such a short amount of time was quite an achievement.

“Try to focus more on the flow of mana,” Zenos instructed Ilya. “The feeling of sending it to your fingertips is different from the feeling of releasing it, so pay attention to that.”

“Y-Yes, I’ll try.”

The day’s lesson ended uneventfully.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Xeno,” Ilya said, bowing her head.

“Sure thing. See you tomorrow, Ilya.”

“Thank you, Ms. Ilya! I learned a lot today!”

“I-I’m glad to hear that.”

Standing next to Ilya, Charlotte brushed her chestnut curls aside with the back of her hand. “Well, I’ll be heading back too, then. But could you prepare a different type of tea for tomorrow? I’d like to try something different.”

“O-Okay,” Lily replied.

“R-Right...” Zenos said. Sounded like Charlotte was coming back tomorrow too.

As the pair left the staff dorms, Charlotte poked Ilya’s back, making her stumble and let out an alarmed, “Ah!”

“Your back is hunched,” Charlotte chastised. “A lady should walk with her back straight.”

“S-Sorry. I’m just a bit tired...”

A group of students from Class E watched the two from a distance. The group of lower-ranking nobles glared sharply at Ilya.

“Ilya sure is full of herself lately.”

“Why is Lady Fennel giving someone like her the time of day?”

“Look at her, buttering up Lady Charlotte. Pretty typical of a commoner turned noble.”

In Herzeth’s class-driven society, the seven great noble houses were second in power only to the royal family. To these students, it was unacceptable for one they saw as inferior to be close to someone in such a high position.

One of them smirked. “Let’s give her a little scare, shall we?”

After school the next day, the two girls stopped by Zenos’s dorm room again, and Ilya seemed unusually downcast. She couldn’t seem to focus during her healing magic lesson, and the flow of her mana was unstable.

“What’s wrong, Ilya?” Zenos asked. “You’re not doing well today.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” a nervous Ilya replied. “Um, I’d like to use the restroom.”

Watching Ilya disappear into the restroom, Lily spoke up with concern. “Something seems off with Ms. Ilya.”

“Yeah,” Zenos agreed. The amount of mana she was producing was fine, but her control was wonky. It seemed more likely to be a mental issue than a physical one. The healer folded his arms, turning toward his other guest. “Charlotte, do you know anything about this?”

Charlotte sat at the dining table, sipping on a cup of tea. “Not really, but...” She tilted her head slightly. “I think I heard her muttering something by her locker.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know.” Charlotte propped her elbow on the table and lifted her now empty teacup. “By the way, could I get a refill? This new tea isn’t half bad.”

“Oh, yes! Ack—” As Lily moved to fetch the teapot, she tripped over Ilya’s

bag, which was leaning against the wall. The young elf managed to maintain her balance, but the bag's contents scattered across the floor. Lily hurried to gather the pencil case and various notebooks, muttering, "Oh no..."

"Hmm? What's this?" A single sheet of stationery fluttered to Charlotte's feet, and the noble girl picked it up. She squinted as she read its contents aloud. "'If you want to know where your textbook is, come alone at midnight to the back of the old Building 3. If you tell anyone about this letter, you'll never see your textbook again.' Oh. I thought it was a love letter, but it's just a threat. That's fine, then."

"What? Wait, wait. That's not fine at all!" Zenos interjected in disbelief.

Lily anxiously took the paper from Charlotte. "Could this be why she's been acting strange?"

The letter had probably been placed in Ilya's locker today. Who could have done such a thing? Zenos recalled the group that had mocked Ilya in the back lawn a few days before, but there was no proof that it had been them. The handwriting could've identified the culprit, but if this had been a noble's doing, they could've easily asked an attendant or butler to write it.

Unconcerned, Charlotte sipped her tea. "She can just ignore it. I doubt she'd be foolish enough to fall for such a suspicious invitation over something as trivial as a textbook."

"I hope you're right," Zenos mumbled. In any case, since Ilya hadn't brought up the subject herself, he decided to put the letter back for now.

Ilya returned from the restroom, still looking unwell. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Her mana flow didn't stabilize at all that day, and they ended up calling it early.

At night, just before the clock struck twelve, Zenos abruptly sat up in bed. As he quickly threw his clothes on, Lily peeked out of the bedroom.

"Oh. Sorry. Did I wake you?" he asked.

"No," Lily replied. "I've been worried about Ms. Ilya and couldn't sleep much."

Her brows furrowed with concern. "Are you going to go check on her?"

"I mean, I *am* her homeroom teacher."

"But the letter said she couldn't tell anyone about it, right? Or they wouldn't return her textbook. Maybe that's why she didn't ask you for help. Should you really be going?"

"Letter? I know nothing about a letter. I'm just going on patrol, like the vice principal told me to. And while patrolling I might pass by the old Building 3."

Lily held back a laugh. "Take care, Zenos."

"Yeah. I'll try not to be out too late." With that, he donned his black cloak and disappeared into the night.

Left behind, Lily stared at the front door for a while before coming to a sudden realization. "Huh?" she mumbled, looking around. "Wait, where's Carmilla?"

Meanwhile, in the back lawn of the old Building 3, about five students from Class E were huddled together behind the overgrown bushes. The area was shrouded in darkness and silence, with only the dim glow of used manastones dotting the landscape.

"There's Ilya," a boy said as an anxious Ilya came into view, wringing her hands together and looking around.

"Hah! Can't believe she actually showed up," another student commented.

"Commoners are miserly like that. Even a single textbook is precious to them."

"So what do we do now?" a girl asked.

Their leader, a male student, smirked. "You know about the hounds buried at the edge of this area, right?"

As an important part of nobles' education, hunting classes were included in Ledelucia Academy's curriculum. The academy kept birds of prey and hounds for this purpose, and any deceased dogs were buried here.

The leader pulled out a small silver whistle from his pocket, watching as it glinted dully in the moonlight. “A servant at my family’s ranch used this whistle. It can mimic different dogs’ barks depending on how you blow on it,” he explained. “We’ll use it to scare the crap out of her.”

“I see,” the female student said, chuckling. “Hearing dogs barking in the dead of night by the dog cemetery would freak anyone out.”

“She’ll probably panic and run around in tears.”

“And then we’ll catch it all with this,” said another student, pulling out a small magic recording device.

The students exchanged glances, chuckling quietly with amusement.

One of the students suddenly looked up. “Huh...?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Um... I just...” the student mumbled, now wearing an anxious expression. “I think I saw a woman in black behind that tree over there, grinning at us...”

“Don’t say stuff like that,” the girl protested.

“Yeah. Nothing’s there, dude.”

“R-Right... Sorry. I must be seeing things.” He rubbed his arms, shivering. “I-I’m starting to get creeped out, though. Let’s just get this over with and get out of here.”

“Tch. Coward. Fine.” The leader brought the whistle to his lips, and—

“Grrrrrrrrrr...” echoed a low growl, making Ilya flinch and shudder.

A delighted laugh escaped the female bully. “Look at her, she’s freaking out! Do it again!”

The leader, however, lowered the whistle from his mouth, brows furrowed.

“What?” the girl asked.

“N-No, it’s... I didn’t actually blow the whistle. And it can’t sound like that anyway.”

The others fell silent, exchanging uneasy glances. And then—

“Grrrrrrrrrr...”

“Grooooooar!”

Something crashed loudly through the underbrush, and ferocious growls rang out behind the group. The students whipped around to see five drooling dogs charging at them. Even in the dim light it was clear these were no ordinary dogs. Their eyeballs were hanging out, their skin reddish-brown with rot, and their bones and organs were on display.

These were zombie dogs—helldogs.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” screamed the leader as one of the dogs bit into his shoe. Now barefoot, he bolted from the bushes and the others followed suit, scrambling to escape the zombie dogs.

Ilya’s eyes widened when her former classmates suddenly burst out of the bushes. “Huh? Wh-What?”

“H-Heeeeeeeeeelp!”

The students came stumbling toward Ilya as the five helldogs began to circle all of them slowly, as if sizing up their prey.

“Wh-Why are there zombie dogs here?!”

“You! Be the sacrifice!”

“No! *You* be the sacrifice!”

“Mommyyy! Save meee!”

With the students on the verge of tears, the five helldogs simultaneously lunged forward. “Grrrrrrrrrr!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeek!”

A man’s voice cut through the students’ screams as they echoed across the night sky. “*High Heal!*”

A wave of white swept past the students like a holy gust of wind. The bright burst of holy-imbued healing magic flickered and faded, leaving no trace of the zombie dogs behind.

The stunned students, still slumped on the ground, muttered in disbelief.

“Huh...?”

“A-Are we safe...?”

A man clad in a cloak dark as the surrounding night walked closer. “Helldogs, eh? What happened here?”



“M-Mr. Xeno!” Ilya exclaimed as she recognized her homeroom teacher. “Wh-Why are you here?”

“Huh? Oh, I was, uh, doing a midnight patrol.” Zenos scratched the back of his head as he turned his gaze to the prone Class E students. “So, what are *you* all doing here?”

The students conspicuously averted their eyes.

“N-Nothing,” the leader replied. “We were just hanging out.”

“You were hanging out here? At this hour?”

“Sh-Shut up! You’re the homeroom teacher for Class F, right? If you’re done here, then just scram.”

Zenos scratched his head again. “All right. Oh, by the way, there’s still one more over there. But I guess I’m done here and am just gonna scram.”

“Huh?” The student looked toward where Zenos had pointed. A hellhound was slowly, cautiously drawing nearer. “W-W-W-W-Wait, wait! Help us!”

Zenos ignored the panicked student’s attempt to stop him. “You told me to leave,” he deadpanned. “Besides, I’m sleepy.”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous! You should care that students are about to get attacked!”

“By the way, there’s someone else here who can use healing magic,” Zenos said, patting Ilya’s shoulder. “Might want to ask her for help.”

“Huh?! Me?!” Ilya pointed at herself in shock as the Class E students stared at her, astonished.

“I-Ilya can...?”

“Yep,” Zenos confirmed. “Better hurry, or that helldog will get here.”

“R-Right! P-Please, Ilya, help us!”

“Y-Yeah! Please! We’re sorry about everything!”

Some of the students clasped their hands together, pleading with Ilya. The helldog was closing in; it was only a few meters away now. Drool dripped like

sludge from the gaps between its sparse teeth.

A pale Ilya took a step back. “M-Mr. Xeno, I...”

“You’ll be fine. I taught you how to do this.”

“B-But...” Ilya’s lips trembled.

“You can do this. You want to be a healer, right?” Zenos smiled gently at Ilya, just like his own mentor had done toward him.

Ilya pressed her lips together and nodded slowly, raising her hands in front of her and focusing her mind.

“Grrr!” the helldog growled, lunging at her as if on cue.

“*Heal!*” Ilya chanted. A white burst of light erupted from her hands.

Struck by the healing magic head-on, the helldog yelped and jumped back. Ilya cast two more spells, and the purified helldog crumbled to dust.

“I-I did it...” Panting, Ilya looked down at her hands in disbelief.

“Sh-She saved us...?”

“D-Damn, Ilya! Way to go!”

Several more of the students praised the bewildered Ilya, and after a few moments, she pulled out a sheet of stationery and held it before her former classmates. “U-Um, could you please tell me where my textbook is?”

A few of the students exchanged glances and looked like they were about to answer, but the leader of the group haughtily spoke first. “Don’t tell her anything. Why should we answer to a commoner?”

Ilya started to lower her head but forced herself to lift it again, placing a hand on her chest as she muttered under her breath, “I...am wonderful. I am wonderful...” With her head held high, she looked down at the bully leader and said in a cold tone, “Very well, then. But your heel is injured, no?”

“Wh-What about it?!”

“If you don’t get it treated immediately, it could fester and turn you into a zombie.”

“Aaah!”

“And...now that I look at it, isn’t your crotch wet? You were scared and wet yourself, didn’t you? I’ll be sure to tell everyone tomorrow.”

“N-No!” the leader cried out in desperation as the other students’ gazes turned to him. “That’s not— This isn’t...!”

Ilya crouched down in front of him and smiled sweetly. “You’ll tell me where my textbook is, won’t you?”

In the end, her former classmates revealed where they’d hidden her textbook and fled the old building in shame.

“I wasn’t expecting the helldogs, but you did great,” Zenos told Ilya in a gentle tone. “I was ready to step in if things got dicey, but you did better here than in practice. You might be more suited for actual action.”

Beyond that, Charlotte’s strange lecture in sovereignty had come in unexpectedly handy.

“N-No, it was all thanks to you, Mr. Xeno. Um, did you know about the letter?”

“What letter?” Zenos asked, feigning ignorance.

Ilya sank to the ground suddenly.

Zenos stepped closer to her. “Hey. What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Ilya looked up at him, half-crying and half-laughing. “M-My legs finally decided to give out.”

Two sets of footsteps echoed softly in the quiet of night.

“They hid it in a storeroom of all places,” Zenos whispered, holding a lamp.

The Class E students had told Ilya her textbook was on a shelf in the corner of a storage room right behind Class F. To be more precise, the storeroom and classroom were both offshoots of the same space—when Class F had been formed, a section had been closed off to form a room in which to house it.

“Um, you didn’t have to come with me, Mr. Xeno,” Ilya mumbled

apologetically.

“It *is* the middle of the night. I couldn’t exactly let you come alone,” Zenos pointed out. He’d insisted on accompanying Ilya when she expressed a desire to retrieve her textbook right away. “But Charlotte had a point. You’re a noble. You could easily get new textbooks. Why the fixation on this one?”

“I don’t care about the other textbooks, but this one is very important to me,” she explained, rubbing her hands together. The academy at night had a somewhat eerie atmosphere, but since this place was near the familiar Class F, Ilya didn’t seem too scared.

The only question was whether the textbook really was in the storeroom. But, given the possibility Ilya could tell others about the bully’s embarrassing little incident and knowing how much nobles valued their reputation, they’d likely told her the truth.

And indeed, after rummaging through the dusty shelves, the pair found a single textbook.

“There it is!” Ilya exclaimed, relief washing over her expression as she hugged the textbook to her chest.

“Glad you found it. Make sure it doesn’t get stolen again.”

“Yes! I’ll take good care of it,” Ilya replied, nodding happily.

“By the way, what textbook is that?”

“Oh. This is an introduction to healing magic.” Ilya held out the textbook. It seemed quite old and its cover had faded. “When I was little, I got sick, and a healer saved me.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that before. That’s what made you want to become a healer, right?”

“That’s right. That healer gave me this textbook when I said I wanted to become a healer too someday. He told me it would be more valuable for my studies than a brand-new one because of all the notes he’d written in it.”

“Huh...” Zenos took the textbook and began to casually flip through it, but came to an abrupt stop upon seeing the annotations all over the pages.

“Mr. Xeno...?”

Zenos stood there frozen, staring intently at the handwriting. “Hey, Ilya... What was that healer like?”

“Um, he was a bit of a jokester and sort of strange, but he was warm and kind to me during my treatment, and a really wonderful teacher besides. Whenever I got scared, he’d show me all sorts of interesting magic circles.” Ilya looked into the textbook with a nostalgic expression. “But, you know, I just called him ‘doctor,’ so I never got his real name. Later, when I tried asking my parents, they couldn’t remember at all. I even asked at the Royal Institute of Healing, but they said they had no records of him. So this textbook is the only connection to him I have left...”

Zenos closed his eyes. “I see.”

He recognized that handwriting. It was the same handwriting as that of the man who had taught him letters, basic life skills, and all about the world, back during his orphanage days. The man who had taught him healing magic and helped a poor kid become something more. The man he owed everything to.

“Master...”

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Oh. Nothing. Sounds like the man who treated you was a decent guy. You should take good care of that textbook.”

“I will!” Ilya took back the textbook with a vigorous nod.

His mentor had paid for using resurrection magic by being cursed to be forgotten by all who knew his name. However, the young Ilya hadn’t known his name, so she still remembered him.

Zenos accompanied Ilya to the late-night carriage stop and saw her off, then lingered on the deserted road for a while. Maybe Ilya had learned healing magic so quickly because she’d studied from the textbook filled with his mentor’s explanations. And now Zenos himself was teaching Ilya.

He stared down at his own palm. “Paying it forward, I guess...”

An eerie chuckle rang out behind him. “Feeling nostalgic, are we?”

“Whoa! You scared the crap out of me!” Zenos whipped around at the sound of the voice to find a translucent woman in black robes floating in the air. “Dammit, Carmilla, how many times have I asked you to stop sneaking up on me like that?”

“I was following you around, hoping for a late-night romantic school rendezvous, but you remain ever the gentleman, I see. You *could* be a little more smooth, you know. Just a tad more smooth.”

“Are all wraiths this lowbrow?”

After three hundred years in the mortal world, Carmilla’s thought process seemed to have morphed into that of an average sleazy middle-aged man.

Zenos put his hands on his hips with a sigh. “By the way, those helldogs were your doing, weren’t they?” He remembered that, back at the Royal Institute of Healing, a large amount of undead had risen due to Carmilla’s power.

The wraith laughed unabashedly. “This is all part of my grand plan for the Seven Mysteries of the Academy! This one involves the sound of dogs barking coming from the old Building 3. I only meant to give those fools a tiny scare, but I misjudged things, and a handful of the pooches crawled out of the ground.”

“You know a student could’ve gotten seriously hurt, right? What then?”

“I would have intervened, of course, but you did before it came to that, so no harm no foul, yes?”

“I guess, but still...” Zenos noticed Carmilla was holding several metal containers. “What are those?”

“Hee hee hee! These are paint cans. I borrowed them from the art room to set in motion the second of the Seven Mysteries of the Academy: strange graffiti that reappears on the walls every morning no matter how many times it is scrubbed off.”

“Uh-huh. Put those back where you found them and get back to the dorm.”

“Whaaat?”

“And stop pouting!”

Amid the sounds of the wraith’s protests and the shadow healer’s

interjections, night went on at the academy.

Chapter 4: The Black Sheep of the Knightly Family

The next morning, Zenos was sitting at his desk in the far end of the staff room when his colleague Hanks called out to him.

“You look a little sleepy, Mr. Xeno.”

“Yeah... I stayed up late last night,” Zenos replied, suppressing a yawn.

Hanks lowered his voice slightly. “Have you heard? Some students from Class E confessed to hiding a textbook belonging to a Class F student.”

“Huh...” Zenos was a bit surprised, but perhaps confessing to the crime had been a better option than risking rumors being spread around?

Hanks shook his head vaguely. “Well, the penalty points are reduced if you confess instead of being accused.”

“Penalty points?”

“You don’t know about them? When students engage in behavior that goes against the academy’s principles, they get assigned a number of penalty points.” An offense could be worth one to ten points, Hanks explained. “And if a student accumulates fifty penalty points in a year, they get expelled. Things rarely get to that point, though.”

“So, in other words, you can get a student you don’t like kicked out by giving them a bunch of penalty points?”

“That’s a pretty dodgy thing to say, but I suppose you did declare war on your class,” Hank teased lightly.

“Oh, no, I was just curious about how the academy operates.”

“If I’m being honest, I’m tempted at times to hand them out at will, but the board reviews all penalty points for legitimacy, so you do need a valid reason.”

“I see,” Zenos mused with a nod. A thought came to mind. “Speaking of which, one of my students had a textbook thrown out in the back lawn before. Was that done by the same group?”

“Oh? No, the group only confessed to this particular incident.”

“Hmm.” Had the students not bothered to bring up the back lawn incident because they’d thought they could sweep it under the rug, or was someone else harassing Ilya too?

As Zenos idly pondered this, Bilsen, the vice principal, approached him with a stern expression. “Mr. Xeno. The headmaster wants to see you.”

When they arrived at the principal’s office on the top floor, the vice principal straightened his posture and gave the door a discreet knock.

“Principal, I’ve brought the new teacher, Mr. Xeno.”

“Come in,” came a genial voice from beyond the door. This had to be the principal of Ledelucia Academy, heir to House Baycladd—the foremost among the seven great noble houses. Zenos hadn’t been able to meet with him upon first arriving here. What kind of man was he?

“Excuse me,” Zenos said respectfully as he followed the vice principal inside.

The room was spacious, lined with red carpet, with a desk at the back large enough for three people to sit side by side. Behind the latticed windows, one could see the campus grounds surrounded by greenery.

“Hey, there. It’s a pleasure,” said a beautiful man with refined features as he casually pushed to his feet.

The principal’s hair was a deep, serene shade of dark gray, and his gaze was cool and composed. The sunlight streaming through the window behind him looked almost like a halo. Though all he was doing was slowly stepping closer, his every movement exuded an air of elegance. He was much younger than Zenos had expected too, probably in his twenties. Thinking back, Zenos did remember Charlotte mentioning this man was her fiancé.

“Albert Baycladd. I’m the principal here.” He extended a hand gloved in white silk.

Zenos lightly shook it. “Nice to meet you. I’m Xeno.”

Albert smiled warmly, then gracefully turned on his heel and returned to his

desk. “Sorry for calling you in just before class. I don’t have any particular business, really. I just thought that, since I was away on a work trip the day you arrived, I should at least meet with you once,” he explained in a gentle tone. “Are you getting used to the academy? I know you were put in charge of Class F straightaway. Are you managing?”

“So far, yeah.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring.” The heir to House Baycladd nodded, looking impressed. “Those students were originally in Classes D and E, but they’re rather challenging, you see. I figured it would be beneficial to bring them together and provide them with more directed education. My thoughts were that this would be in their best interest, but...”

He sighed lightly.

“The previous four homeroom teachers all gave up, and that left me in quite a predicament. You’ve done me a great favor by coming here. And on a personal recommendation from Lord Fennel, no less. I knew you were the man for the job.” The principal gave a flawless, charming smile. “I trust you’ll take good care of the class, Mr. Xeno.”

The meeting seemed to be over, so Zenos replied with a nod and left the room. As he walked down the corridor toward his classroom, he glanced back at the principal’s office.

Albert Baycladd, principal of Ledelucia Academy and the next head of the foremost of the seven great noble families... He was at the apex of nobility, yet there was nothing off-putting about his demeanor or manner of speech. Was he just confident? Was he actually genuine? Or was it something else?

Back inside the principal’s office, Vice Principal Bilsen gave the closed door a dirty glare. “Are you sure this is wise, Principal? We know nothing about that man. Should we really welcome him into our prestigious academy?”

“It was a request from my fiancée’s father. It would be unwise for House Baycladd to get into disagreements with one of the other seven great noble families. And Lord Fennel is a major donor—refusing wasn’t an option. Besides, he seems to be managing just fine, doesn’t he? I like his fearlessness.”

The principal gazed over the beautifully maintained grounds, a graceful smile on his lips.

“Let’s put our faith in him, shall we? Let’s trust that he’ll perform his role as intended.”

Meanwhile, in Class F, the students were gathered around Ilya’s desk.

“I hear some guys from Class E hid your textbook?”

“Y-Yes. But it’s okay! I got it back in one piece.”

“They seemed weirdly scared of you, though. What happened?”

“Oh, u-um, nothing...” Ilya shook her head vigorously.

Ryan, a large male student with short brown hair, looked down at her. “Forget that. What I wanna know is what your angle is here.”

“Um, I...”

“You and that teacher, Xeno, are getting along just great, aren’t you?” Ryan probed, exuding an intimidating aura as he glared at Ilya. “Have you already forgotten what our previous homeroom teachers were like?”

“Ah, I mean...” Ilya stammered as Eleanor, a girl with red hair, gave her a cold, wordless glare.

Ilya nervously glanced toward the back of the room as if seeking help, but Charlotte hadn’t arrived yet. Surrounded by her classmates’ piercing stares, Ilya lowered her head and fell silent. After a few moments, however, she bit her lip and raised her head.

“I-I think Mr. Xeno is different from our previous teachers,” she managed.

“What?”

“I’m common-born, but he treats me the same as everyone else. And he genuinely supports what I want to do.”

“Psh. He’s totally won you over, huh?”

“Excuse me.” Charlotte had come into the classroom and was now standing

beside Ilya. “Move aside, please. You’re blocking my path.”

As the other Class F students silently made way, Ryan clicked his tongue lightly and pointed at Ilya. “Well, your precious teacher will probably run away with a little scare or two. I’ll test him myself.”

The next afternoon, Zenos and his class were standing at the far end of the campus grounds. A swordsmanship class had turned into a self-study session, and he was there as a supervisor.

“For now, do some warm-up exercises, then practice your swings with the proper form,” Zenos said, conveying the instructions from the swordsmanship tutor to the students.

Though this was called a swordsmanship class, the fact it involved noble children made it more of a formal exercise than anything. Although some noble students might go on to become adventurers, for the most part they were far removed from life-and-death situations.

“All right, then,” Zenos mumbled to himself. He sat on a bench and watched out of the corner of his eye as the students—now in their exercise outfits—stretched in a relaxed manner.

Thanks to his supervisory role, he’d managed to avoid the vice principal’s busywork for the day. Seizing the opportunity to learn something, he opened a social studies textbook he’d brought with him.

“Hmm...”

The book summarized topics such as the geography of the continent and Herzeth’s political system in an easy-to-understand manner. It also touched upon the country’s characteristic class system, with the royal family at the top—but something else caught his eye. There was hardly any mention of the poor.

Since the poor were not officially recognized as citizens, it made sense there wouldn’t be much information. What little the book mentioned was that immigrants, criminals, and descendants of the minority groups from the time of the country’s founding were all collectively categorized as “poor.” It went on to say that a lower class had been created to divert the citizens’ dissatisfaction

away from the government. Lastly, it mentioned that currently, poor men were sent to guard the borders for minimal pay.

“Again, the class system...” he muttered.

Suddenly, something blocked the sunlight and cast a shadow over the pages of Zenos’s book.

Looking up, he saw a large male student standing defiantly before him.

“Ryan,” Zenos said. “What’s up?”

Ryan smirked. “Hey, Teach, just doing practice swings is really damn boring for me.”

“Yeah? How about you paint the outer wall by the back gate?” Zenos suggested, casually trying to give Ryan the sort of task the vice principal doled out. “The paint’s peeling off in some parts.”

“And why in blazes would I have to do something like that?” Ryan demanded.

“Then what do you want to do?”

“I want you to be my sparring partner.”

Zenos blinked a few times at the suggestion. “I’m just a healing magic teacher, you know.”

“You’re subbing in for the swordsmanship instructor, right? Here I am, trying to take my studies seriously. You’re not just gonna ignore me, are you?”

“I’m not ignoring yo—”

“Besides, you said before you’d accept any challenge, and to come at you with all we’ve got, right?”

“I, uh, I guess I did.”

“U-Um, Ryan?” Ilya called out. “Mr. Xeno isn’t—”

“You shut your mouth, Ilya,” Ryan spat, shooting her a glare. “Sparring is part of the class, right? What’s the problem?”

Zenos closed his textbook and slowly pushed to his feet. He wasn’t particularly keen on the idea, but it would be a problem for him if Ryan reported him for his lack of enthusiasm. Besides, the principal had just asked

him to take good care of Class F. Even if he didn't know the students that well just yet, he *had* told them day one that he'd take on any challenge.

As Zenos took a wooden sword from Ryan, he glanced at the others. Some of them were watching, whispering among themselves with amused grins.

With a relaxed stride, Zenos moved to stand before Ryan. "Look, I'm not a frontline fighter. Don't expect much."

"What are you talking about?" Under the others' watchful eyes, Ryan lifted his wooden sword high. "If anything happens, just remember it's an accident, yeah? Don't penalize me or anything."

"If anything happens'?" Zenos echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Hi-yah!" Ryan swung his sword down forcefully, its tip cutting through the air with a sharp noise.

Zenos twisted his body, dodging the strike with a half-turn.

"Tch!" With a click of his tongue, Ryan took another swing, this time horizontally.

Again, the tip cut through the air, barely missing Zenos as he lightly jumped back to avoid it.

"Stop dodging, damn it!" Ryan thrust his sword forward, but Zenos angled his own wooden sword and parried the attack.

During Zenos's time as an adventurer, Aston had relentlessly drilled him under the guise of sword practice—that was coming in surprisingly useful now. Despite his personality, Aston had still been a swordsman in a Gold Class party, after all.

"Wh-What the...?! Who *are* you?!" Ryan demanded.

"A healing magic teacher," Zenos replied. He crouched down to avoid the wooden sword swinging diagonally at him from above, all the while observing the student before him.

Though Zenos wasn't that well-versed in swordsmanship, he could tell Ryan's sword skills weren't bad. The student knew when to apply force and when to relax, and moved smoothly. While Zenos was confident the wooden sword

wouldn't hit him while his visual acuity and agility were enhanced by a spell, it was still clear Ryan's ability was above that of the other students.

In the end, the sparring match against Ryan went on until the chime signaled the end of the class.

Breathing heavily, Ryan glared at Zenos with frustration. "D-Damn this. Why...why can't I hit you?"

"Because I'm doing my best to dodge."

"Stop doing that! You're not helping!"

"Maybe you have a point. This doesn't make for very good practice, does it?" Zenos narrowed his eyes and tightened his grip on his wooden sword.

Once again, Ryan raised his sword high and swung down with force. "Take this!"

Watching the sword's trajectory, Zenos shifted his body slightly and thrust his right hand forward.

"Gwah!" Ryan croaked as the tip of Zenos's sword struck him in the forehead.

"Oh! Whoops." Zenos had intended to stop short, but Ryan had stepped forward faster than he'd anticipated.

Ryan fell back in spectacular fashion, clutching his forehead and groaning. "Ugh! Y-You! How dare you do this to me?!"

"Um, you're the one who told me to stop dodging." Zenos sighed, scratching his cheek awkwardly. "Anyway, you're fine. I've healed the wound."

"What...?" Ryan froze for a moment, touching his forehead repeatedly with a perplexed expression. Not even a trace of a bruise remained.

"See? No evidence of aggression from a teacher. None at all."

"Y-You...!"

"All right, class dismissed. Get back to the classroom."

"Mr. Xeno, that was amazing!" Ilya murmured in admiration.

Charlotte smiled boldly. "Hmph. It's only natural for someone I have a *slight*

interest in to display a modicum of skill.”

The other students, meanwhile, all stared coldly at Ryan. As Eleanor walked past him, she murmured into his ear, “Disappointing.”

“Grr...” Ryan growled. Left alone as the other students headed back to the classroom, he pounded the ground with a clenched fist. “Damn it! What’s that teacher’s problem...?!”

As night fell, the bustling downtown district where citizens walked to and fro was illuminated by the enchanting glow of multicolored streetlights. On the streets lined with taverns and showhouses, there were a variety of gaming parlors where one could play cards, billiards, and engage in simple games of chance. In a corner of one such parlor that smelled of alcohol and tobacco, Ryan sat with a bitter look on his face, his legs crossed.

“Damn that bastard,” he cursed under his breath. He was in the middle of downing a glass of sparkling water when a young man with long hair approached him.

The young man had a tattoo on his right arm that looked like a snake coiling around it, and he was accompanied by a large group of followers. “Hey, Ryan, why the long face?”

“Oh, it’s you, Guld. It’s nothing. Don’t mind me.”

Guld sat next to Ryan, a half-smile on his lips. He casually put an arm around Ryan’s shoulders. “Come on, now. We’re friends, aren’t we? Tell me what’s up.”

“It’s nothing serious.”

“Aw, don’t be that way. I can’t have a good time with you in a bad mood like that.” Guld’s expression turned somewhat serious. “You’re the only one of them prissy nobles that’ll hang with the likes of us. If anything’s bothering you, just say the word. I wanna help.”

Ryan glanced at Guld and his entourage. After a moment of silence, he muttered, “There’s this teacher that’s a pain in my ass.”

“A teacher?” Guld echoed. “Oh, right. You’re a proper dude, going to that

fancy-pants school and crap. Not like the rest of us expelled scum.”

“It’s not like I *want* to go there.”

“I know, I know. But nobles care about appearances and all that. Can’t have a stain on your record disgracing the whole family. Don’t wanna be the one dragging your amazing older brother down, right?”

“Watch it.”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. No need to make faces at me.” Guld shrugged, lifting a glass filled with amber liquid. After downing it in one satisfied gulp, he wiped the corners of his mouth and leaned closer to Ryan. “We could go and show that teacher a thing or two about how harsh the real world is. How’s that?”

“I don’t need your help for that.”

“Now, now, listen. You’ve got a rep to maintain. Can’t go overboard, yeah? But us? We can do anything. We’re not gonna mention you, of course.”

Ryan was silent.

“You told us before that there aren’t any decent teachers around,” Guld whispered. “I get it. People like him treat guys like us as trash. We’ve gotta teach that sort a lesson, that’s all.”

Guld’s lips curled into a slight smile as he watched the still reticent Ryan.

“In exchange, all we ask for is a nice reward if things go well.”

The next day after school, Ilya and Charlotte were in Zenos’s dorm room as per usual.

“Ryan, you say?” Ilya asked.

Zenos had asked her about the male student after she’d finished tutoring Lily. Ryan had left a strong impression on the healer, particularly because of how well he’d handled a sword compared to everyone else.

“Right. Yes, I think he’s quite good with a blade,” Ilya said. “If I recall correctly, he comes from a family of knights.”

“Ohhh.”

The Herzeth royal family were descendants of the nation's founders, and the nobles were said to be the descendants of the key figures who'd supported the founders. Among them had been tacticians, knights, and mages—it seemed that even now, the original backgrounds of their ancestors still had varying degrees of influence on the traditions of noble families.

“So he's been practicing swordsmanship since he was a child,” Ilya concluded.

“I see...” Zenos crossed his arms and nodded slowly. “That's why he challenged me to a sparring match during swordsmanship class.”

“Well, that...doesn't usually happen during class. He only does it when the instructor is away and the homeroom teacher is supervising self-study lessons...”

“Really? How come?” Zenos figured that if Ryan wanted proper practice, it'd have made much more sense to spar with an expert like the instructor.

“Well...” Ilya began hesitantly, “many students in Class F have various issues and were treated poorly by their homeroom teachers. So they tend to be rebellious, or rather—”

“They throw tantrums, as children are wont to do,” Charlotte interjected sharply as she sipped tea at the table.

“Th-That may be so, but...”

“Oh, well it stands to reason. Not everyone can have a perfect lineage and perfect beauty like I do.” Charlotte placed her hand on her chest confidently.

Zenos gave her an expressionless nod. “Yeah.”

“Hey! Don't just brush me off!” Charlotte protested.

These exchanges, it seemed, were becoming routine.

The healer turned his gaze to Ilya. “You said the students have issues, right? What's Ryan's issue?”

“I don't know the details, but... Ryan has an older brother, apparently a very brilliant one. He was compared to his brother from a young age, and his brother was favored over him while they were growing up.”

“I see. So they locked him in a stone cell, starved him for ten days, and beat him with a stick over and over,” Zenos mused solemnly.

“I-I don’t think it’s gone quite that far. What are you talking about?”

“Oh. Nothing.” Zenos couldn’t exactly say that had come from his own experience at the orphanage, so he averted his gaze and cleared his throat.

After their usual after-school activities ended and Zenos saw the two girls off, he headed toward the academy’s back gate. He gave the knights from the Royal Guard stationed there a small nod, then stepped outside.

The paint on some parts of the academy’s outer walls had begun to peel off and, of course, the vice principal had ordered Zenos to repair it. Apparently the man enjoyed assigning chores to teachers who didn’t come from noble backgrounds, since Hanks—the homeroom teacher of the first-year Class D—had also been grumbling about being given extra work.

It was unclear how aware the principal was of the vice principal’s behavior, but since this was a learning opportunity for Zenos despite his dodgy background, he’d decided to comply for the time being.

“Might as well get this over with.”

He dipped a brush into the paint and began to skillfully apply it to the wall. Between the orphanage and his adventuring party, Zenos had done all sorts of menial work, so he was capable of handling most tasks. Compared to what he’d already gone through, the vice principal’s harassment seemed like nothing.

As he continued his work, a voice called out from behind him. “Hey, you’re Mr. Xeno, right?”

“Hmm?” Zenos turned around to see a man wearing the Ledelucia Academy uniform with his hands in his pockets. “Yes, that’s me. Do you need something?”

“I’m having a bit of a problem,” the man replied. “Can you help me out?”

“A problem, you said?” Zenos turned back to the wall and resumed his work. “I’m a little busy right now. Can we do this another time?”

“Hey, man, I’m a student telling you I have a problem. Painting the wall can wait.”

The brush in Zenos’s right hand stilled and he sighed. “What’s the problem you’re having?”

“Someone’s injured.”

“That so?” Zenos shrugged and set the brush down in the paint can at his feet. “Fine. Where?”

“This way.”

Zenos followed after the man and soon they reached a small grove. After pushing through a few more bushes, they emerged into an open space where over a dozen rough-looking men were loitering.

All eyes turned to glare at Zenos, but he just calmly surveyed the men. “Well? Where’s the injured?”

“Heh heh heh. There isn’t one, not yet. That’s gonna be you in a second,” said the man who had brought Zenos there in a low voice. “I hear you’re pretty skilled, ‘Teach.’ How about a little fight with us?”

Zenos cast the man a silent look, then let out a heavy sigh. “Had a feeling this was a trick. Guess I wasted my time.”

“Say what?”

“I could tell at a glance you weren’t one of the academy’s students.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I can smell it. I’ve met plenty of guys like you before. I figured I’d come anyway just in case someone was actually injured, but it sounds like I didn’t need to bother.” With that, Zenos turned on his heel.

“Hey! You think you can just walk away like that?” The man took off his uniform jacket and slung it over his shoulder, revealing a tattoo of a snake coiled around his right arm.

Several other men moved to block Zenos’s path.

The tattooed man chuckled. “Don’t worry. We’re not gonna kill you. Just give

you enough of a beating that you won't be coming back to school for a while. Just be mindful that some of these guys are really pent up, so things might get a little rough."

Zenos yawned.

"Dude, you're *yawning*? What the hell for?"

"I'm just sleep-deprived. Besides, teaching takes a lot of mental energy."

"Get his ass!" the leader yelled, signaling for the other men, who all rushed Zenos at once.

"Huh?"

"Wait, what?"

"What the shit is happening?"

None of them could catch Zenos, whose agility was enhanced by a spell. He jumped to the right, then dodged to the left, easily evading the men's outstretched hands before dashing into the bushes. He burst out of the grove, then paused for a moment, turning back to see the men desperately chasing after him.

Then he took a deep breath.

"Heeey! Royal Guard!" he shouted. "There's a bunch of miscreants over heeere!"

"What...?" The men, caught off guard, froze in their tracks.

Hearing Zenos's loud shout, the academy's security personnel came running from the back gate. "What's happening, sir?!"

"Look. Those guys! They're trying to disturb the peace of the academy!"

"So they are. Seize them!"

The guards rushed toward the men. Panicking, they turned their backs and fled, scurrying off like spiders in every direction.

"Wow," Zenos murmured. "So this is what authority feels like!"

"D-Damn it!" the leader cursed. "You'll pay for this!" His empty threats

echoed pathetically into the evening.

“This isn’t even part of my job. Why do I have to deal with all this hassle?” Zenos watched the men’s hasty retreat for a moment before deciding to return to his work.

As he covered the unpainted spots on the wall, a thought occurred to him.

Come to think of it... Where did he get that uniform from?

That night, Ryan was once again at the downtown gaming parlor, immersed in the never-ending hustle and bustle of the night and letting his thoughts wander.

All his life, he’d been compared to his talented older brother, leading to day after day of disappointment and resignation. He’d first come to this place almost a year ago, drawn almost by instinct. Here, there were no parents, no brother—only friends. For someone like him, who had always been a fish out of water at home, this was the only place where he could feel at ease.

Of course, home wasn’t the only place where he didn’t fit in—school was the same. He couldn’t stand how every teacher looked at him the same way his father did, especially after he’d been placed in Class F.

He’d planned to scare off the class’s fifth homeroom teacher, this Xeno character, just as he had the others—but the new teacher had easily dodged him and showed no reaction to his antics whatsoever. In his frustration, he’d taken up Guld’s offer and arranged for a uniform and a one-day special district pass for the man. Still, Guld’s tendency to take things too far had always concerned Ryan a bit.

As he glanced around the parlor with a glass in his hand, he spotted Guld surrounded by the usual entourage.

“Yo, Guld. How’d it go?”

Guld approached slowly and didn’t respond, a dark glint in his eyes that sent a slight shiver down Ryan’s spine.

“I’m asking you how it went,” Ryan insisted.

Guld sat down opposite Ryan and replied quietly, “I’m totally pissed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was just gonna rough him up a bit, but I’ve changed my mind. He mocked me, the bastard. A teacher at some fancy-pants school, mocking me!”

Ryan let out a small sigh as he looked at Guld and the others. “So you failed? Hah! I warned you, man. That guy’s weirdly quick on his—”

Before Ryan could finish, Guld pulled a knife from his pocket and thrust it in front of the student’s face. “Relax, Ryan. I’m not gonna leave it at this. In our world, once someone disrespects you, it’s over for them.”

After glaring silently at the blade’s tip for a moment, Ryan said, “What are you planning?”

“We’re being watched, so we can’t go near the academy anymore.”

“Then—”

“It’s fine. We’ll just have him come to us.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Easy.” Keeping the knife pointed at Ryan with his right hand, Guld snapped his fingers with his left. Immediately, his followers lunged at Ryan and pinned the student down.

“Hey! What are you—”

“Sorry, Ryan. Thanks for stuffing our pockets. But see, truth is, I *really* hate nobles.”

“G-Guld...”

Guld looked down coldly at the stunned Ryan. “That guy’s a teacher, right? So if his student’s in danger, he’ll have no choice. He’ll take the bait, won’t he?”

After class the next day, Zenos returned to his dorm room with Ilya and Charlotte in tow as usual.

“Hello, Lily,” Ilya greeted. “I look forward to today’s lesson.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Ilya!” Lily exclaimed, raising her right hand

politely.

“So, may I have some tea?” asked Charlotte, behaving as she usually did. She’d started bringing pastries to go with the tea, which Lily seemed to look forward to. “Today, I have chocolate cookies made with the finest ingredients, ordered from the confectionery that provides sweets for the royal palace. A commoner would need to wait at least ten years for delicacies like these, so you should be grateful.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Lily shouted with a salute, peeking excitedly into the cookie box before running off to the kitchen.

Watching her with an awkward smile, Zenos placed his bag on the table. A thought occurred to him, and he pulled an envelope out of the bag. “Oh, right. I almost forgot.”

“Mr. Xeno, what’s that envelope?”

“Hmm? Ah, this thing? It arrived at the academy for me around noon, but I forgot to take a look.” He tore the envelope open and pulled out the letter within. After reading what it said, he froze.

“What’s wrong?” Lily asked.

“Mr. Xeno, what does that say?” Ilya asked next.

“It’s not a love letter, right?” Charlotte asked last.

As the three girls crowded closer, Zenos sighed and showed them the letter.

We’ve taken Ryan. If you want him returned safely, come to the old gaming parlor in the city district tonight. Don’t bring the Royal Guard if you want him to live.

“Whaaat?”

“Ryan!”

“What in the world is this?”

Zenos scratched his head as he watched the three girls react. “Um, I’m not really sure either.”



Now that Zenos thought about it, Ryan had been absent today.

A worried Ilya clasped her hands together. “There are rumors that Ryan hangs out with thugs from the city. M-Maybe he got involved in something dangerous...”

“Thugs from the city, you said?” Zenos echoed. Yesterday’s incident, when he’d been approached by clearly shady men, came to mind. Their leader had been wearing a Ledelucia Academy uniform. “Man, being a teacher sure is rough. You need to teach, do chores, and even rescue kidnapped students.”

As he reached for the door, Ilya called out, “Wait, Mr. Xeno! Please, take me with you!”

“No,” he replied, opening the door. “I’ll go alone this time.”

Ilya insisted, “P-Please, Mr. Xeno!” Curious, Zenos asked her why she wanted to go, and Ilya looked down. “W-Well, there was that time when students from another class were harassing me on the back lawn, and Ryan helped me out. I thought maybe I could do something to help him out too...”

Now that Ilya mentioned it, Zenos did remember something like that happening.

Charlotte raised her slender eyebrows slightly. “Ilya, don’t tell me you have feelings for that bru—”

“Oh! No! It’s not like that at all!”

“That was a very prompt denial indeed...”

“I-I’ve always been overly timid, so I never got to thank him properly. All of us in Class F lack confidence in some aspect or another, but...” Ilya turned to Zenos, looking him straight in the eye despite being on the verge of trembling. Her meek nature belied a stubborn side, it seemed. “I feel like, ever since you came to our class, I’ve changed a little. So, I just... I wanted to do something for Ryan...”

Zenos thought back on the sensitive and argumentative Velitra, and how her personality contrasted with his own intuitive and carefree nature. How their mentor had observed their unique characteristics closely and adjusted his

teaching methods accordingly. He wondered what their mentor would've done in this situation.

"All right," Zenos said, turning to Ilya and nodding slowly. "Do you happen to know where this old gaming parlor is?" He'd been about to rush out, but now he realized he didn't actually know the location.

"Oh, yes. I'm originally from the city, so I'm familiar with it. It's on the outskirts of the downtown area. My parents used to warn me not to go near it."

"Then, sorry to ask, but can you lead the way? On one condition, though. When we get there, I want you to stay hidden and not come out until I say it's okay. Yeah?"

"Y-Yes!" With an eager nod, Ilya followed Zenos.

Charlotte hurriedly chased after them. "Wait! I'm coming too!"

"Huh? Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? I can't just leave the two of you to wander around the downtown area at night."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"N-Nothing at all." Charlotte looked away, then suddenly remembered something and turned to Lily. "Oh, right! Could you wrap three of the cookies for us? You can have the rest."

"Yes, ma'am!" Lily replied with a salute. She wrapped the gourmet cookies in paper, seemingly having been completely won over by the treats.

Charlotte slipped the wrapped cookies into her shoulder bag, raised her right hand energetically, and exclaimed, "Let us go!"

"You *do* know this isn't a field trip, right?"

As the summer sky sank into twilight, the downtown area stirred to life, bright lights adorning the landscape as though blinking awake. The shouts of peddlers who made the night their battleground echoed through the air, and the vibrant lamps lured customers into shops.

In stark contrast, just a few blocks away from the lively street lay a deserted road sparsely lit by streetlights where an old gaming parlor stood silently. A new branch of the shop had opened elsewhere, and this building was no longer in use; it now served as a hideout for a group of unruly youths, and locals stayed away.

Within, at the center of the empty and lifeless floor, a well-built young man sat tied to a chair. His hands and feet were bound with ropes, and even his torso had been secured in place. The young man had resisted and been struck several times; the corners of his eyes were swollen, his lips split, and the inside of his mouth oozed blood.

“You bastards,” Ryan spat, his voice thick with menace as he glared at Guld. “You think you can get away with doing this to me?”

Guld, however, showed no hints of remorse. He ran his hands through his long hair. “Oh, we will, little Ryan. I mean, your parents don’t give a crap about you anymore, do they? You think they’ll care if their good-for-nothing, delinquent son doesn’t come home?”

Ryan gritted his teeth in silence. That was likely true; he couldn’t imagine his father caring enough to send someone looking for him.

A small smirk crossed Guld’s features. “You know, pretending that a noble was one of us made my skin crawl. I was planning on squeezing a little more coin outta you, but whatever. Once we show that stupid teacher what’s what, you’ll be useless. I mean, if your family pays a ransom, maybe you’ll be fine. But we can’t count on that happening, can we?”

Guld’s followers burst into laughter at the mockery.

As Ryan glared at them, he felt his heart grow hollow. He’d never had any friends, he realized. It had taken him this long to see that to these guys, he’d only ever been an easy source of money. He’d been unwanted at home, he couldn’t fit in at school, and now, even here—his sanctuary, he’d thought—there was no place for him.

He clenched his fists and muttered, “Idiots.”

“What?”

“He’s not coming, you know. My teacher.”

Guld narrowed his eyes silently.

“You’re right, Guld,” Ryan said with a crooked smile. “My old man doesn’t give a crap about me. The teachers at school don’t either. Who’s gonna give a damn about some delinquent put in a class for losers? What, you think a vague note about my life being in danger, with no proof, is gonna lure my homeroom teacher here? You think he’ll bother?” He sighed, resignation welling up within him. “Serves you bastards right that a teacher from a prissy academy made a mockery of— Ugh!”

Before Ryan could finish, Guld grabbed him by the hair and forced his face downward. “You know, Ryan, now that I think about it, we don’t need you in one piece, do we? If the letter isn’t enough to convince the guy, we can always send him a finger.” The thug pulled a knife from his pocket, the blade gleaming dimly in the light as he slowly brought it closer to Ryan. “Hey, aren’t your family, like, knights or something? Thumbs are pretty important to grip a sword, aren’t they?”

Ryan felt the cold blade rest against the base of his thumb, which was tied behind his back. With a soft groan, he involuntarily closed his eyes.

Story of his life. Nothing had ever gone right for him. He’d been abandoned by his parents, scorned by his teachers, and his “friends” had been anything but. He didn’t care what happened anymore. Despair gripped his body, blacking out his vision.

But before anything happened, Guld’s movements stopped. An unusual commotion came from the entrance, and Ryan slowly looked up to see one of Guld’s underlings flying toward the thug leader.

“Whoa!” Guld quickly jumped back, and his underling crashed back-first to the floor, hard.

More shouts followed, and several more people came flying in Guld’s direction. The men writhed in agony, clutching their backs. Soon the crowd parted, and a man casually stepped forward.

“Hey, Ryan. You shouldn’t be skipping class, you know.”

“Y-You...”

It was Ryan’s homeroom teacher—but wearing a cloak blacker than night and a defiant smile, he looked less like a teacher at a prestigious academy and more like the head honcho of an evil organization.

“Wh-Why?”

“Usually I prefer to stay out of trouble. But I *am* a teacher. For now, anyway,” the teacher said nonchalantly. He turned his gaze to Guld. “Had a feeling it was you. You wanted me, so here I am. Mind returning my student?”

Having finally regained his composure, Guld raised his knife in front of him and laughed. “You idiot. You walked right into my trap. I’m Twilight Guld. You’ve heard of me, haven’t you?”

“Nope.”

“Pfft! Ha! Acting tough, are we? I’m the king of the scum around here, buddy. One word from me and a hundred of ’em will come running.”

“Cool. Still haven’t heard of you.”

A vein popped on Guld’s forehead. “You got a death wish? Fine. You and Ryan here can sleep with the fishes.”

“Weird. The letter said you’d let him go if I came here.”

“Sorry. The lot of us weren’t raised right, see.” Guld’s eyes gleamed cruelly as he licked the blade of his knife.

The black-cloaked man showed no signs of fear, however. He put a hand on his shoulder, casually cracking his neck.

“Yeah? Well, not to be a party pooper, but I’m pretty sure I wasn’t raised right either.”

What the hell is this guy thinking?

Ryan, still bound to the chair, stared blankly at his homeroom teacher, who’d barged into the old gaming parlor—now a hideout for thugs—all by himself. A reckless, utterly irresponsible move. Sure, the guy might have some confidence

in his skill, being a healing magic teacher, but Guld and his crew couldn't be underestimated. This was basically a rabbit hopping into a pack of wolves.

His teacher, seemingly unaware of the danger he was in, was speaking to Guld in a nonchalant tone. "Come on. We're all tired, right? Why bother fighting? Just return Ryan and we'll take our leave."

"Dumbass. Get him!"

At Guld's command, the thugs all attacked at once. Just as Ryan had predicted, his homeroom teacher was swarmed, quickly swallowed by the violent maelstrom.

"Why did you come here?!" he shouted. His teacher should've known this would happen, and he still—

Just as Ryan began to grind his teeth in frustration, several of the thugs collapsed, groaning.

"Huh...?"

Beyond them, Ryan's teacher calmly replied, "I came here because of my job, you know. I can't afford to be fired just yet. Honestly, I'm more of a backline type of guy... This isn't really my cup of tea." A faint blue light glimmered around his fists.

The thugs leaped at the teacher, but he took each of them down with a single blow. The guy was strong. Still, there was no way he could handle more than a hundred opponents.

"Just leave me!" Ryan snapped. "My life sucks anyway! It's always sucked!"

"*Your* life sucks?" The teacher echoed, his shoulders twitching at Ryan's outburst. Three men jumped him, and he took them down with ease before continuing. "Ryan, do you know your own birthday?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah? Why wouldn't I?"

"Haaah!" a man shouted, rushing the teacher from behind with a wooden beam.

"I'm busy here," the teacher spat, silencing the man with an elbow strike before slowly approaching Ryan. Thugs kept charging at him, one after another,

and they all quickly crumpled into groaning heaps on the floor. “How many times a week do you get to eat?”

“Um, every day? Doesn’t everyone?”

“How many baths do you take in a year?”

“What do you mean, ‘in a year’? You gotta bathe every day! Gross!”

“Do you sleep in a cramped stone cell, sharing a paper-thin blanket with twenty others?”

“Of course not! Where’d you get that idea?!”

“I see...” The teacher let out a small sigh.

Five men, clearly more roughly built than the previous lackeys, stepped forward. They seemed to be ranked higher than the rest.

As they all launched themselves at the healing magic teacher, he drew back his fist slightly and declared, “That sounds like a damn good life to me, then!!!”

“Guhhh!!!”

With a single, unbelievably fast punch, the five high-ranking thugs who had tried to stand in their way went flying.

After casting a glance down at the men writhing on the floor, the teacher shot a glare in Ryan’s direction. “A nobleman, complaining his life sucks. That’s rich. What are you trying to do, mock life itself?”

“Uh, I... I...” Ryan’s words failed him under the weight of his teacher’s strange intensity.

Standing next to Ryan, Guld asked in a strangled voice, “What the... Who the hell are you?!”

“Just a plain ol’ teacher of healing magic.”

“S-Stay back! Come any closer and this kid’s done for!” Sweat beaded on Guld’s forehead as he pressed the blade of the knife to Ryan’s neck. “You’re real full of yourself for some teacher in a school for rich kids. Get back, or I’ll do it!”

“Go ahead,” the teacher replied. He stepped closer, unfazed by the threat.

“I’m serious! I’ll do it! Don’t cry about it later!” Guld shouted.

The cold feeling at Ryan’s neck grew more intense. He found himself giving up, waiting for the inevitable, but Guld’s knife couldn’t so much as graze his skin.

“Wh-What the shit is happening?!” the thug exclaimed.

“It’s useless. I put a protection spell on him.” The teacher stepped forward once. Twice. Three times. Step by step, he closed the distance. “I think I get it, Ryan. You thought these guys were your friends, but they weren’t, right? Honestly, I wasn’t sure why you were so upset, what with having three meals and a bath every day...”

“W-Wahhhhhhhh!” Guld cried out, lunging at the teacher with the knife in hand.

The teacher easily dodged the thrust and drove his fist into Guld’s stomach. “I can relate to the pain of being betrayed by your friends, though!”

“Gwahhh!” Guld was sent flying against the wall, projectile vomiting along the way.

The teacher looked down at his fist. “Oh. Crap. I got too personal again.” He let out a breath. “Oh well. Don’t worry, Ryan. Life’s full of all sorts of things. Live long enough and you’re bound to get betrayed by a friend or ten.”

“Wh-Who *are* you, really...?” Ryan stammered, lips trembling.

Guld, crouching by the wall, groaned weakly. “W-Wait...”

The teacher paused.

“You think...” Guld began between ragged breaths, clutching his stomach, “you can...just do this shit to me...?”

“Look, I feel a little bad. I didn’t want to do this. But I did tell you earlier to just return my student to avoid a fight, so...”

“Heh... You’re finished.”

“What do you mean?”

“You might be shocked by this, but I’ve got friends in the Black Guild, you

know,” Guld declared with a sadistic smile.

The Black Guild. A legendary den of evil deep in the slums, teeming with the worst of the worst. Ryan had had no idea Guld had connections there. A chill ran down the student’s spine. As Ryan looked at his teacher, however, he saw the man was still unfazed.

“The Black Guild, you said?” the teacher asked, tilting his head. After a moment, he scratched it awkwardly. “So, about that... Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s mostly nonfunctional. A friend of mine’s been making sure of it. Like, very sure.”

“What? D-Don’t talk nonsense!” Guld snapped, glaring at the teacher with hatred.

“Well, I’ve heard a few factions still remain, though they’re not operating the same way...” the teacher replied with startling nonchalance. “Anyway, if you ever see a guy named the Beast King, tell him the shadow healer sends his regards. I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Eh? Huh? What?” A slack-jawed Guld stared at the teacher. “Wait, Beast King... Like, *the* Beast King...? No way...”

“You’ve heard of him, right? You know, the Beast King, an executive of the Black Guild. I hear he’s been doing humanitarian work lately. Want me to introduce you? Maybe he could knock some sense into you guys.”

“A-An executive... Uh. You’re...lying. Right?”

“Do I look like I’m lying?”

Guld swallowed hard and slowly looked around at his fallen gang members. All these hardened thugs, taken down easily by a single man. Not only that, but their opponent showed no signs of fear or agitation in a situation like this. That meant he was used to much darker, more brutal places. Plus, Guld had heard of the Beast King—an executive of the Black Guild. The executives were known to be charismatic kingpins of evil. Who was this teacher that he could so casually offer to introduce Guld’s gang to someone like that?

One thing was certain: They’d messed with the wrong man.

The blood drained from Guld's face, and his teeth began to chatter. Finally, he slowly turned to face the teacher, then slammed his forehead against the floor.

"I-I-I'm sorryyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!" he yelled. "I swear, we'll never bother you again! We'll disband the gang! We'll start honest work tomorroow! Just spare me, pleeease!!!"

Clutching his stomach, the pale-faced Guld stumbled out of the old gaming parlor and fled. The rest of his gang, who'd just begun getting back up, also begged for their lives before clumsily following after Guld on shaky legs.

Now only the healing magic teacher and Ryan, still tied to the chair, remained. The teacher bent down and picked up the knife Guld had dropped.

"Who... Who *are* you?" Ryan asked.

"You know, you've got some stuff going on, sure. But you're not the only one." The teacher cut Ryan's ropes with the knife.

Ryan was finally free, but his heart remained heavy, lost in an abyss of gloom. He stared blankly at the gaming parlor, which was now empty.

The teacher gave Ryan's shoulder a pat. "Don't worry. I can tell you from experience you'll find yourself good friends eventually if you just live your life right."

"From experience? Really, who in blazes are you?"

"I told you. Just a plain ol' healing magic teacher. Officially, anyway."

"Officially?"

The teacher's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized Ryan's face. "They really roughed you up, huh? Swollen eyelids, split lips... Well, guess it's time for my other gig."

"Your what?"

"You don't wanna go home looking like that, right? I'll heal you up. How about a million wen as payment?"

"Wh-What?" Ryan gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. "So you're just after my money too!"

“I mean, yeah?” the teacher replied with an aggravated sigh. “I’m not a charity worker. Think about all the effort I’ve put into this. I’m not just healing your face, you know. I also took care of all those thugs and saved your life. If anything, a million is a bargain.”

“W-Well—”

“Please wait, Mr. Xeno!” a voice called out from the entrance to the building as two people came running. The dim lights illuminated the figures of Ilya from Class F and her classmate Charlotte, a member of one of the seven great noble houses.

“Wh-Why are you guys here?” Ryan asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

The teacher shrugged in exasperation. “They were worried, apparently. Insisted on coming along.”

“I just happened to come along,” Charlotte protested.

“Or you could just admit you were worried too, Charlotte,” the teacher retorted.

Ilya stepped forward. “Um, I’ll heal Ryan’s wounds.”

“Ilya...” Ryan murmured.

“You helped me a few times when I was being bullied. I’m sorry I never thanked you properly.”

Ryan was silent as Ilya raised her hands.

“Aw, that’s too bad,” the teacher said, his lips curling into a small smile. “I was hoping to make some serious coin.”

Ilya began to chant and a warm light enveloped Ryan, mending his wounds. He felt a faint warmth—not only where he was injured, but strangely, deep in his chest as well.



The teacher glanced around the empty gaming parlor, resting his hands on his hips. “You don’t need to look for friends in a place like this, you know. You already have them. Come to school tomorrow, yeah? You’ll have a place there.”

Ryan’s eyes widened for a moment, and then he silently looked down. Suddenly, something dark and sweet-smelling was thrust in front of him. He looked up again and saw Charlotte standing over him, wearing a smug expression.

“Wh-What the...?” he asked.

“Well, it would be rude of me not to give you one too, wouldn’t it? Besides, you look so pitiful. Just be grateful and eat the gourmet cookie.”

“B-But, I mean, the situation...? Why do I have to eat a cookie here and now?”

“*What?* Are you refusing my generosity? Do you know how hard these are to get?”

“That’s not the point!”

The teacher and Ilya watched with amused smiles as Charlotte and Ryan bickered. In the end, Ryan gave in and took a bite. Indeed, a refined sweetness and a soft, rich aroma spread across his tongue.

Charlotte crossed her arms and said haughtily, “When you’re feeling down, you should eat a delicious treat. Satisfy your taste buds and stomach, and you’ll forget all about the little things.”

“Little things, she says...” Ryan muttered, eyes downcast as he crunched on the rest of the cookie.

“So? Delicious, isn’t it?”

“It’s salty, dumbass,” he grumbled, a single tear glistening on his cheek.

Chapter 5: The Girl Whom Fire Hated

Albert Baycladd, headmaster of Ledelucia Academy and heir to one of the seven great noble houses, gazed out the large, ornately framed window of his office. The room was elegantly furnished, the decor tastefully arranged and exuding both elegance and serenity.

“How has Class F been faring?” he asked. His face, tinged with a hint of melancholy, had an indescribable allure to it.

“They seem to be slowly growing closer,” came a report from behind him.

The headmaster, still looking out the window, gave an appreciative nod. “The new teacher appears to be managing to bring them together effectively.”

“Yes, it seems so. He doesn’t react to any of their harassment.”

When students ignored the morning roll call, the new teacher would praise them, saying, “I respect you showing up on time at all.” When flowers were placed on his desk, he expressed delight, saying, “Giving flowers to your teacher is a nice custom. Can I bring them back with me? My sister will love them.” No matter the prank, the man remained unfazed.

“Some say he’s fundamentally different from the previous teachers somehow.”

“Is that so?” Albert glanced at the calendar on the wall. “The term will end soon.”

The academic year at Ledelucia began in the tenth month, ending in the next year’s seventh month. This meant that in about two weeks, the academic year would come to a close.

Albert turned his refined features back to the window and murmured softly, “At this rate, Class F will have been created for naught.”

The girl was feeling a bit flustered.

Ledelucia Academy was a prestigious institution within the powerful Kingdom of Herzeth, and only children of the upper class were allowed to attend. However, the class she was currently in—Class F—had only been created last year, and was the lowest-ranked of all classes. A quick look at the students gathered there made it obvious they had a variety of issues.

One of them was newly risen to nobility and couldn't find a place among the blue-blooded. Another had grown rebellious after being compared to his more accomplished brother. Even the teachers at the school made no effort to conceal their disdain for these troublesome students.

While the students of Class F couldn't be said to be friendly with each other, they still felt a sense of solidarity in their defiance against their teachers. They'd collectively harassed these teachers in various ways, and while it was hard to say what the breaking point had been, their four first homeroom teachers had vanished partway through the term.

It served them right.

However, since the arrival of their fifth homeroom teacher, something had been off. The man was easygoing and elusive, but his healing magic lessons were easy to understand, and he treated all students equally. There wasn't a trace of the unspoken disdain from the previous teachers, and he didn't look at them like nuisances at all.

It felt as though their whole class was falling for this surface-level act.

During a break, the girl stood up and approached the seat of her well-built classmate. "Ryan, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Aren't we supposed to get rid of that guy? What's with the good behavior these past few days?"

"Yeah, I'm done with that."

The girl stared at him with wide eyes. "Did he beat you into submission during the swordsmanship class or something?"

"Say what you want." Ryan rested his chin on his palm, gazing at the sky

outside the window. “Ilya’s right. He’s a little different from the other teachers we’ve had.”

“Oh. Huh.” As she walked away from her classmate’s seat, she muttered softly, “Coward.”

Why couldn’t people see it was just a thinly veiled act? This was what teachers did—they made students drop their guard, then turned on them.

“Fine,” she muttered, her crimson hair swaying as she bit her thumbnail sharply. “I’ll do it myself.”

“They’re multiplying,” Zenos mumbled quietly as he looked around his dorm room.

Lily sat at the table, taking basic lessons from Ilya. Charlotte was enjoying her tea, elegant as always. And on the couch sat a large male student with his legs crossed, reading a swordsmanship manual. With Ryan joining the after-school supplementary lessons, the population density of Zenos’s room had suddenly gone up.

“I-I’m sorry for bothering you every day,” Ilya said, bowing her head repeatedly.

“Well, you came here as part of a deal to both teach and study, so it’s fine, Ilya,” Zenos pointed out.

Charlotte glanced over at him, bringing her teacup to her lips. “Oh? And what about the sweets I bring? The ones you wouldn’t have the opportunity to partake in otherwise? Are those not enough for you?”

“They’re more than enough!” Lily answered, saluting for some reason.

“There, see? Today, I’ve brought nut butter Baumkuchen. Oh, and some tea leaves imported from the East. You should try them.”

“Yes, ma’am!”



Charlotte had completely won Lily over. Despite everything, she *was* an upper-class noble, and probably skilled at dealing with people. Maybe this was a talent that came with noble blood.

Zenos looked over at the couch, and Ryan glanced up from his manual. “What, you got a problem?” the student asked. “I heard Guld’s gang disbanded. And this place sure beats being at home.”

“No, not a problem, exactly...” Zenos muttered. Back at his clinic, demi-humans were constantly coming and going. Now that he thought about it, things weren’t that different here. If anything, these students were a much more well-behaved bunch in comparison.

Still, had the students crowded around their former homeroom teachers after school like this too?

When Zenos posed the question, Ilya shook her head vigorously. “Before, we couldn’t even imagine going to the teachers’ dorm rooms.”

Ryan nodded grimly as well. “Yeah. The four before you treated us like we were burdens to the academy right off the bat. They’d try to give us penalty points over the tiniest crap.”

“Penalty points,” Zenos echoed. Hanks had mentioned those were given out when the kids behaved in ways unbecoming of an academy student. If he recalled correctly, fifty points over the course of an academic year meant expulsion.

“You shouldn’t be surprised that you get penalty points if you’re frequenting dubious establishments downtown,” Charlotte commented coolly.

“Y-You’ve got the wrong idea!” Ryan replied, a bit flustered. “I started going there because the way the teachers treated me here was pissing me off...”

“Would expulsion be an issue, by the way?” Zenos asked plainly.

Ilya and Ryan exchanged glances and nodded.

“It would be for me,” Ilya said.

“Well, I wouldn’t care, but...my parents would,” Ryan explained. When asked what he meant, he scratched his head roughly. “Noble society is small and tight-

knit. Most of us have known each other since elementary school, and we often see each other at parties and whatnot. To nobles, being expelled is a clear sign of failure. Like, it means losing your place in noble society. Which, I mean, if that was all it was, I wouldn't care, but..."

"It's the rank review that's the problem, right?" Ilya ventured, to which Ryan nodded bitterly.

"What's a rank review?" Zenos asked. He'd never heard the term before.

Ilya shuddered slightly. "Every few years, the royal family and the seven great noble houses review the nobility's ranks. Middle-ranked nobles can become high-ranked, and the opposite can also happen."

"That's a thing?"

"So, there are a few ways for commoners to become nobles, right? Like what happened to Ilya over there," Ryan said, continuing the explanation. "Left unchecked, the number of noble families would keep going up. To maintain balance, they review the ranks regularly. Which, to low-ranked nobles like us, can mean being demoted to commoners." Ryan leaned back on the couch. "And rank reviews are based on each family's achievements. A child getting expelled could be seen as tarnishing the family name and count against them. So my old man would be in deep trouble if I got kicked out."

"Huh. So that's how it works."

In practice, new noble families didn't come around very often, so losing one's noble status was a rare occurrence.

Charlotte, who was elegantly eating her Baumkuchen, spoke up casually. "Not that this is a concern of mine, of course. I'm part of the people who get to make those decisions. They couldn't expel *me*."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Why won't you listen to me?! And you! The ogre in the back! Don't join in!"

"My name's Ryan, you know. The least you could do is remember your classmates' names."

“Hmph! I remember Ilya’s. *She* respects me. But since you don’t, I don’t need to call you anything but a dumb musclehead.”

“Oh, you’ve got guts, don’t you? You prissy—”

“Hey,” Zenos cut in sharply. “Don’t start a fight in my room.”

For better or worse, Ryan wasn’t the type to hold back, and so he often clashed with Charlotte. Still, Charlotte seemed to find it somewhat refreshing to have tea with the after-school group, where unlike with her Class A peers, she and the others could speak their minds freely.

Probably.

Zenos crossed his arms and glanced at Ryan. “So you’ve been scaring off the teachers because of the penalty points they were trying to give you?”

“You make it sound worse than it is. We were just annoyed and messed with them a little, that’s all.”

“Despicable,” Charlotte said. “Rotten as you are, you’re still nobles. You should behave with more dignity.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ryan grumbled softly. “I don’t disagree. But once you get thrown into Class F, there’s no going back. We’re not part of one of the seven greats like you are.”

“Well, of course you’re nothing like me,” Charlotte replied matter-of-factly.

“I don’t get it, though,” Zenos interjected, tilting his head, arms still crossed. “How did you get the other four teachers to quit? I mean, you guys haven’t been harassing me.”

“You’re just built different,” Ryan pointed out.

“Am I?” After a brief pause, Zenos clapped his hands as though a thought had struck him. “Oh! Was that knife under my desk on the first day part of the ‘harassment’?”

“You only just noticed?” Ryan asked. “By the way, that wasn’t me. Just saying.”

“I-It wasn’t me either!” Ilya exclaimed.

“I would never resort to such uncouth methods,” Charlotte added.

“Then who did it?” Zenos asked.

The three students fell silent, tilting their heads pensively.

“I dunno, but...Eleanor hates teachers the most out of all of us,” Ryan pondered.

“Eleanor?” Zenos echoed. That was the girl with crimson hair and the perpetually intense glare.

Ryan folded his hands behind his head. “Back in elementary school, she was bright, confident, kind of like everyone’s leader. But halfway through secondary school or so she began acting like this.”

“Huh. I wonder what happened?”

“Beats me. But it sounds like she’s having even more problems with her parents than me. And her distrust in teachers is, like, out-of-this-world high.”

“Eleanor comes from a family of mages, right?” Ilya chimed in hesitantly.

“Yeah. Fire mages, if memory serves.” The current nobility of Herzeth was descended from people who’d been instrumental in the nation’s founding, and had originally served in specific roles. Just as Ryan came from a line of knights, Eleanor came from a family of mages. “She was a prodigy. Like, child genius level good.”

Ryan paused for a moment.

“But I haven’t seen her use fire magic in a long time. I asked her why, once, and she just said, ‘Fire hates me.’”

A crimson-haired girl sat down on a bench, crossing her legs in silence. Though it was summer, the morning air was cool and refreshing, and a faint mist covered the back lawn of the academy.

Eleanor liked this time of day, before the world woke up. When the annoyances of daily life weren’t all around her. When the loneliness of the night had gone. At this hour, the school felt much more comfortable than home, at

least.

There was a time when she'd occasionally run into her classmate Ryan here. Their conversations had never been particularly lively, but they'd shared something of a sense of solidarity, as though neither of them had a place to be. But about a year ago, Ryan had stopped showing up. He'd grown aggressive, picking fights with anyone and everyone. And then, recently, he'd suddenly calmed down...

Something unexpected caught Eleanor's attention, interrupting her thoughts—a strange drawing on the wall of the school building.

"What is this?" she murmured, taking a closer look. The drawing depicted a woman with long hair dressed in black, standing next to a man also dressed in black. The woman was making a hand chopping gesture at the man's head for some reason, wearing a triumphant expression. "This looks like crap..."

Who'd drawn this? Had some elementary school brat snuck into the academy? This graffiti was ruining her tranquil morning vibes.

Still seated, Eleanor slowly lifted her right hand, then faced her palm toward the drawing on the wall and gently closed her eyes. Sensing the waves of mana flowing through her body, she gradually synchronized her breathing with its rhythmic pulse. Slowly, mana welled up within her like water being poured into a vessel, and she directed it to her palm as though controlling the flow of her blood.

Eleanor abruptly opened her eyes, letting out a harsh exhale. A memory flashed through her mind. Pain. Numbness. The mana within her turned chaotic, her heart pounding in her ears.

After taking several deep breaths, she finally rose to her feet and walked toward the graffiti. She dampened a handkerchief at a nearby sink and scrubbed the sloppy scrawl away.

"What are you doing, Eleanor?"

She flinched and turned around to find her homeroom teacher standing there holding a broom for some reason.

The healing magic teacher smiled and cheerfully said, "Thanks for cleaning the

wall. Appreciate it.”

“You appreciate it?”

“Yeah. The vice principal saddled me with cleaning the back lawn. With how big it is, I have to start early in the morning or I don’t finish. It’s hard to do the walls on top of everything else, so I appreciate it.”

“It’s not that I was trying to help. There was just some ugly graffiti on the wall, and I erased it.”

“Graffiti, you said?” he echoed. “Of course. She went behind my back again.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh. Nothing. Just talking to myself. That drawing might reappear no matter how many times you erase it, but I’d be grateful if you didn’t let that discourage you. Can you clean it again tomorrow?”

Eleanor had no idea what he meant by that, but if nothing else, it was clear her precious morning quiet was over.

As she silently turned to leave, the teacher called out from behind her. “Hey, Eleanor. I noticed you’re always wearing long sleeves. Aren’t you hot?”

“I just like how the winter uniform looks. Is that a problem?”

“Not really. Also, did you just cast a spell?”

She stopped in her tracks and turned around, replying in as calm a tone as possible despite her inner unrest at the question. “I didn’t.”

“Really? The raw mana around here seems a little off, that’s all.”

Eleanor clenched her fists and glared at her homeroom teacher. “Like I said, I didn’t cast anything. I can’t use magic.”

“Is that so...?”

She turned her back on her puzzled teacher and walked away without looking at him again.

Anxiety swirled in her chest. So many days had ticked by. Mornings had turned to afternoons, afternoons had turned to nights. The seasons had carried on as they always did. There wasn’t much time left before her birthday, and at

this rate—

After walking far enough, Eleanor came to a sudden stop. She glanced back at her teacher through the gaps between the trees; he was now sweeping the back lawn at an alarming speed. Somehow he seemed better at cleaning than even the servants back at her family's estate.

But in the end, he was still a teacher. He was probably good at wearing masks. She was certain that, like the others before him, he was watching like a hawk for the tiniest of reasons to give her penalty points. Teachers weren't trustworthy.

"What should I do...?" she asked herself. Even after returning to the classroom she remained deep in thought, troubled by her dilemma.

Every student in Class F, to varying degrees, had been a victim of unfair treatment from teachers. Ryan had openly rebelled against them, but his behavior had suddenly changed. Charlotte from Class A, and even Ilya, the commoner turned noble and walking misfortune magnet, had warmed up to the teacher. Eleanor could sense the rest of the class's rebellion had begun to fade, and though their teacher, Xeno, was nearing the end of his tenure, there was no telling what strange things he might do before it was over.

I have to do something, she thought, a sense of urgency and duty welling up inside her.

Eleanor had been sticking to playing small pranks up until this point, but the homeroom teacher had either been too inattentive or too thick-skinned—she couldn't tell which—and hadn't reacted at all. It was outrageous enough that she couldn't help but wonder what kind of background the man had.

She absentmindedly slid her hand under her desk, and her fingertips brushed against something. Pulling it out revealed a newspaper. Some students subscribed to the paper, which was placed under their desks every morning; this one must've been delivered to the wrong person.

With a sigh, she went to get rid of it when an article caught her eye. A teacher at a school in the city district had been caught entering the girls' locker room and fired for it. Eleanor stared at the article for a moment before a slight smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Welcome back. You’ve got a letter,” Lily said as Zenos returned to his dorm room after class.

“A letter for Mr. Xeno?” Ilya repeated.

“Is it a love letter? No way, right?” Charlotte asked.

“Oooh, I wanna see,” Ryan said.

“Hey! Breach of privacy!” Zenos protested, pushing the usual trio aside before reading the letter. Within was a request for life advice, asking him to come to the music room tomorrow after school. There was no name marked as the sender. “Life advice?” Zenos muttered. “Is that something teachers give to students?”

Ilya nodded enthusiastically. “It is. This academy is a bit of a unique case, but in the city schools, teachers sometimes help students with career advice and even listen to their family troubles.”

“Is this person planning to confess to him under the pretense of life advice? Maybe I should go watch,” Charlotte mused.

“Y-You can’t, Lady Charlotte!” Ilya interjected. “It’s personal!”

“I know, I know. I was, naturally, joking. I would never behave in such an improper manner.”

As he listened to their exchange, Zenos found himself getting lost in thought. His mentor had taught him healing magic, of course, but the man had also taught him much about life. Perhaps this was an aspect of education as well.

“Life advice...? Huh,” he murmured to himself.

Zenos had come to this academy a month and a half ago. Thinking he’d finally reached the point where someone trusted him enough to ask him for life advice had him feeling a bit sentimental.

As he glanced over the letter again, a voice came from the void. “The music room, eh...?”

“It’s almost time...”

The next day after school, Eleanor stood in the quiet and still music room. Outside the window, the setting sun bathed the clouds in a faint crimson hue. Usually, the classrooms were kept cool by refrigerating manastones, but the heat in the unused music room was stifling.

Still, she felt a strange chill in her chest.

Eleanor had been the one to send the letter asking the homeroom teacher to come here, and soon, her target would arrive.

“Life advice,” she muttered. “*You’ll* need that after your teaching career comes crashing down.”

She’d hatched her plan after seeing the newspaper article about the teacher who’d been fired for inappropriate conduct. Eleanor would wait in a state of semi-undress, and when the teacher arrived, she would scream and claim he’d attacked her. Such conduct toward a young noblewoman would destroy anyone’s career beyond the possibility of recovery.

Though she felt reluctant to undress, she had to create the necessary circumstances to enact her plan. Eleanor let out a deep breath and began to take off her school jacket. She removed the ribbon at the collar and bared her neck and left arm, leaving the jacket hanging from her right arm. Now with only a thin blouse covering her torso, she lifted her skirt slightly as well.

All that was left to do was wait patiently for her target. Twilight deepened, and Eleanor’s shadow stretched long across the room.

“Something seems...”

It was starting to get a little cold. She’d taken off her jacket, yes, but it was still summer—yet the room felt like it was cooling down as though a refrigeration manastone was in use. Shivering slightly, Eleanor tried to pull the jacket hanging from her right arm back on when a sudden *clack* echoed through the room.

Startled, she quickly lowered the jacket again and looked toward the door,

but no one seemed to have come in. Thinking she must've imagined things, she looked around—and something strange caught her eye.

“Huh?”

The portrait of a musician hanging from the wall was slowly swaying from side to side.

“Wh-What?”

She blinked several times, but the painting kept swaying despite there being no wind. Then, without warning, the piano in the room began to play.

“Eek!”

Eleanor stepped back instinctively and lost her footing, falling onto her backside with a thud, yelping.

“Wh-What is this? What’s happening?!”

As Eleanor tried to get up, rubbing her sore bottom, a chilling voice suddenly echoed from the void. “Ooo...”

“Huh?”

“I figured since I had come here to peep I would take the opportunity to enact the third of the Seven Mysteries of the Academy, the Haunted Music Room. But I was most definitely not expecting *you* to be the one!”

“Wh-What? What the...?”

At the very end of the various lined-up portraits of musicians was a painting of a woman with black hair. Had there ever been a famous musician like that?

The dark eyes of the woman in the painting suddenly snapped open, glaring at Eleanor. “I went to the trouble of sneaking past Zenos’s watchful gaze to manifest a strange piece of graffiti on the wall, hid in the shadows to enjoy the discoverer’s reaction, and *you*... You erased it... And you referred to it as ‘crap’ too...”

“E-Eek!”

The woman, dressed in jet-black attire, crawled out of the painting’s frame, her long dark hair falling forward. “Cuuurse yooou!”

“Eyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”



Immediately, Eleanor realized her mistake. This was bad. Shrieking like that was going to attract other people's attention.

"What happened?!" shouted an older girl as she rushed into the music room, as if on cue.

Soon after, more students and teachers arrived, including her original target—the homeroom teacher. But he was only the fifth or so person to enter. She couldn't possibly claim he'd attacked her.

"What happened?" someone asked. "Are you all right?"

"I-I'm... There's... There's a ghost—" she stammered in a hurry, the words dying in her throat when she noticed everyone awkwardly staring at her state of half-undress. "W-Wait! It's not... It's not what it looks like!"

What an awful blunder. Now she just looked like a pervert.

The homeroom teacher, who'd been standing there in silence, knelt beside her and tilted his head slightly as he produced an envelope from his pocket. "Did you send this letter? What kind of life advice are you looking for, exactly?"

"I-I told you, it's not what it looks like! It's not what it looks liiiiiiiiike!"

The next day during break, Eleanor sat at her desk, holding her head in her hands.

"This is the worst..."

In the end, the school hadn't believed her story about the ghost. They'd concluded she'd probably planned on playing the piano in the music room to clear her head, but ended up hallucinating, dazed by the heat. The partial stripping was explained away as her not thinking straight due to heatstroke. Her plan to trap her teacher had completely backfired, and all it had done was expose her half-nakedness to a crowd.

She lifted her head and made eye contact with Ryan, who sat diagonally across from her.

"That must've been rough," he said.

“Sh-Shut up!” she snapped.

“Hey! Eleanor!”

Ignoring his attempt to call out to her, Eleanor dashed out into the hallway. Rumors about the incident had already begun to spread, making it hard for her to stay in the classroom.

It still beat being at home. Nothing was going right. Her relationship with her parents, her relatives, her school life. Nothing. The only time she’d felt a sense of accomplishment recently was when she’d managed to get rid of the teachers who’d treated her like trash.

But now her attempt to frame her current homeroom teacher as a pervert had failed, and after what had happened, she couldn’t possibly use the same trick again.

As she trudged down the hallway, a voice called out to her from behind. “Oh, hey, Eleanor.”

“Oh...” She turned around to see a brown-haired man wearing a charming smile and carrying a box in both hands—Class D’s homeroom teacher, Hanks. She’d originally been a member of his class.

“We haven’t spoken in a while,” he said gently. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop them from moving you into Class F.”

“Whatever...” Eleanor averted her gaze.

“Have you been well?”

“Do I look like I have?”

“I suppose not. Well, I’m just glad you seem healthy. I heard from Mr. Xeno that heatstroke is a surprisingly serious condition.”

Word about the incident had *really* spread, it seemed. Still, Hanks wasn’t showing any signs of awkwardly trying to sugarcoat things.

In this academy, students tended to look down on teachers not of noble blood, but Hanks was different. He said what needed to be said without overstepping, and while he was friendly, he didn’t get too close. When it mattered, however, he would listen to students and stand by them, which

made him relatively well trusted.

“What are you doing?” Eleanor asked, staring at the large box in Hanks’s arms.

“Oh, just chores. I’m in charge of organizing supplies and managing the food inventory. Vice Principal Bilsen is hard on common-born teachers.” Hanks made an exaggerated face and shrugged. “Just a little while ago, I went to the pantry in the basement, and the door almost closed on me. I could’ve been locked in! The hinges are old and don’t work right anymore, see. There’s a mechanism to open the door from the inside, but it’s broken too. I was *this* close to being stuck. Maybe this is all part of the vice principal’s master plan...”

“Oh.”

“I see your reactions—or lack thereof—haven’t changed at all.” Hanks smiled awkwardly, adjusting his grip on the box with a grunt. “Granted, compared to how many chores Mr. Xeno gets, I have it easy. Anyway, try not to push yourself, yeah? Take care.”

Eleanor silently watched Hanks’s back as he walked down the hallway carrying the heavy-looking box. Something dawned on her, and she murmured, “The vice principal’s master plan...”

An idea struck her. A way to scare her homeroom teacher so badly she might actually be able to get him to leave.

As she slowly made her way down the street lined with noble estates, Eleanor continued to refine the idea in her head. She’d chosen to walk on purpose; she’d have arrived home far too quickly by carriage.

“Hello, dear cousin,” came a sudden voice, making Eleanor turn her head.

Leaning against a fence was a girl, a little shorter than Eleanor, wearing a beret. Her name was Milena—she was Eleanor’s cousin, who attended the secondary school division of Ledelucia Academy.

“What?” Eleanor replied flatly. The two girls had been frequent playmates once upon a time, but they’d grown distant halfway through secondary school.

Milena chuckled softly. “It’s been a while, so I paid your estate a visit, but you weren’t there. I never expected you to be *walking* home. How plebeian of you.”

“So...what do you want?” Eleanor asked coldly.

Milena brought a hand to her mouth. “Oh my! Scary, scary. I simply remembered your sixteenth birthday is coming up soon and came to offer my congratulations.”

A dull pain thrummed in Eleanor’s chest at the word “birthday,” and she glared at her cousin. “Are you trying to mock me?”

Still smiling, Milena shook her head. “No, my congratulations are heartfelt. You finally get to leave the home you hate so much.” She stepped away from the wall and slowly approached the silent Eleanor. “We of House Freysard have always been a lineage of fire mages. The head of the family is traditionally succeeded by their eldest child, but a blood tie is only one of the requirements.”

Milena raised her index finger and parted her lips slightly.

“Flame Ring.”

A faint flame flickered into existence, floating in the air and forming a circle around her fingertip. Eleanor’s eyes widened as Milena lifted her finger, showing off the flame.

“The other condition, of course, is that the heir uses fire magic on their sixteenth birthday. If they can’t, then the successor will be the eldest relative from a branch family who can. Which would be me.”

“Since when—”

“Back when we were children, dear cousin, you could wield fire magic as effortlessly as you could breathe. Honestly, I’d all but given up. I’d thought I’d be stuck in a branch of the family. You wouldn’t know, Eleanor, but there’s a stark difference in treatment between the main and branch families. But then, one day, you suddenly couldn’t use magic anymore. It was my chance. Fortunately for me, I had a bit of mana, and so I poured every last drop of my sweat and blood into practicing.”

Milena extinguished the flame at her fingertip and walked past the stunned

Eleanor.

“My poor cousin. Not only have you lost your magic, but you’ve been placed in the obscure Class F. And you’ve made a fool of yourself in the music room, I hear? Try not to get expelled for bad behavior. You’d have nowhere left to go.”

“You—”

“Now then, have a good day. Do leave the matters of House Freysard to me.”

As Milena’s figure faded into the twilight, Eleanor raised her palm toward her cousin’s back. She focused her mind, steadying her breath, and tried to ignite her mana like a small spark slowly building into a flame.

Nothing.

Eleanor shook her head and lowered her right hand silently. Sweat was beading on her forehead. She knew the rules, and there wasn’t much time left before her birthday. Still, she had convinced herself she’d eventually be able to call upon her fire magic again.

But that had never happened.

Though she wasn’t particularly interested in becoming the next head of the family, she couldn’t forget the disappointment etched on her parents’ features after the loss of her magic. They’d begun treating her as though she were a sore spot, which had made her avoid seeing them as much as possible.

While her assignment to Class F was temporary and would end soon, there was no guarantee that her current homeroom teacher wouldn’t bombard her with penalty points at the last minute. That was just how teachers were.

And as her cousin had pointed out, the incident where she’d been found half-naked in the music room painted a much different picture from the model student the academy wanted. If her homeroom teacher so desired, he could use that incident to give her a large amount of penalty points.

“I’ll get him before he gets me,” she muttered quietly, clenching her fists.

The next day during lunch break, Eleanor called out to Zenos as he walked down the hallway.

“Do you have a minute?” she asked.

It was rare for Eleanor to initiate conversation, and Zenos made a mental note of how unusual this was as he turned toward his student. “What’s up? Do you need life advice again?”

“No!” Her eyebrows twisted in obvious anger. Normally she was expressionless, standoffish, so it was unusual to see her emotions on display like this.

“Then what is it?”

“I want some ice.”

Zenos’s brows furrowed at the request. “Now that’s out of nowhere. What do you need it for?”

“An ice pack. I’m not good with heat.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense, considering the recent incident.” Zenos scratched his head lightly. “I’m a healing magic teacher, though. I can’t exactly make ice on demand.”

“There’s some in the food storage in the basement, so come with me to get it. A teacher has to accompany me.”

“Oh, they store food in the basement? Sure, then.”

It was lunchtime, and Zenos had already finished the vice principal’s busywork. Lately the man seemed to be running out of tasks to push on Zenos, and he’d even scowled, grumbling about Zenos’s “absurd efficiency when handling chores.”

“So, where are we headed?” Zenos asked.

“This way.”

Zenos glanced around the school as he followed behind Eleanor. Soon it would be two months since he’d started teaching at this prestigious academy. The semester was drawing to a close, and his tenure would end with it.

Though he hadn’t fully achieved his original goal to grasp how a proper primary education worked, thanks to Ilya’s help and Lily’s sharp wit, some

progress had nevertheless been made. And while the system at Ledelucia Academy was too vast to serve as a direct reference, with his colleague Hanks's help, he'd come to understand a few things.

Still, some mysteries remained. What did it truly mean to be a teacher? Why had his master chosen to educate a pair of children in the slums, despite standing to gain nothing from it?

As they continued to walk down the quiet hallway, they sensed someone around a corner just ahead.

"Oh! Mr. Xeno!" Ilya exclaimed.

"Whoa. Hey, Eleanor," Ryan said.

"Excuse me? Why are you two alone?" Charlotte demanded.

"What are you three doing here?" Eleanor asked, her face twisting into a look of obvious displeasure for some reason.

Ryan snorted lightly. "Have you heard about the Seven Mysteries of the Academy? Strange things have been happening all over the place."

"Ryan thought it'd be fun to investigate them," Ilya explained. "So we started looking into it..."

"As a representative of the nobility, I cannot simply allow odd rumors to spread unchecked around the academy," Charlotte said. "I had no choice but to tag along. Though I was reluctant to do so, of course."

"Ah. Yes. Strange things," Zenos deadpanned.

"Why are you speaking in monotone?" Charlotte asked.

"Oh, um, ignore me." Zenos waved his hand in front of his face.

"So," Charlotte continued, glaring at Zenos, "where were you two going without informing me?"

"Do I actually need your permission to go anywhere? Anyway, Eleanor wanted to go to the pantry in the basement, so I'm accompanying her."

"Hmph." Charlotte crossed her arms and glanced at Ilya next to her. "In that case, I shall come too. And you as well, Ilya."

“Huh? Me?”

“Is there a problem? The basement seems like the exact kind of place where weird rumors might originate. We must investigate.”

“O-Okay...”

Ryan, who’d been quietly watching Eleanor, raised his hand. “I’ll come too. You don’t mind, right, Eleanor?”

Eleanor clicked her tongue softly. “How did things end up like this?” she muttered under her breath.

In the end, Ilya, Charlotte, and Ryan all ended up tagging along as well and the group headed to the basement.

“I go out of my way to choose an empty hallway, and now my plan is ruined,” Eleanor muttered under her breath, brows furrowed. Her words were too quiet for the others to hear.

As they descended the stairs to the basement, the air around them grew chilly. The lack of sunlight made their surroundings dim, and their voices seemed to echo unusually loudly. Eleanor, still looking upset, refused to speak at all as they finished their descent.

After a short walk, they came across a towering metal door.

“This must be where they store food,” Zenos mused. “You wanted ice, right, Eleanor?”

Eleanor didn’t reply.

“Eleanor?”

“Oh. Yes...” She gave a halfhearted nod.

Zenos approached the storage room, tilting his head in confusion. “So, how do we open this door?”

“What? You came here and you don’t even know that?” Charlotte quipped.

“How am I supposed to know? I wasn’t expecting to come here.”

Ilya hesitantly interrupted the pair’s bickering. “Um, I think you need a passcode.”

And indeed, there was a metallic panel with numbers on the side of the door that emitted a green light. It was probably some kind of magical device.

“A passcode,” Zenos echoed. “I don’t know it.”

“Well, you should!” Charlotte remarked. “You’re a teacher!”

“I can’t just magically make myself know. I spend more time on chores than lessons, anyway. Not to toot my own horn, but even the vice principal was shocked by my incredible chore efficiency.” Zenos let out a hearty laugh.

“That’s not something to be proud about!”

“Anyway, enough of—” Eleanor began, but Ryan stepped forward, cutting her off.

“Hold on a sec. We need ice for Eleanor, right? Let’s see, if I remember correctly...” Ryan stared at the panel and slowly pressed the numbers, as though recalling what they were.

With a faint buzz, the light emanating from the panel shifted from green to blue. Immediately after, the giant door began to slide open with a heavy creaking noise.

“Whoa! Nice, Ryan!” Zenos said.

“One day back in elementary I was really hungry, so I hid here and stealthily watched a teacher punch in the code,” Ryan explained, puffing out his chest. “Can’t believe they haven’t changed it since, though. Damn.”

“Keep your mouth shut, Ryan,” Eleanor snapped sharply. “He’ll give you penalty points!”

“What? This was back in elementary. No way he can still punish me for that.”

“You don’t know that! Teachers can turn on you in an instant!”

A somewhat awkward atmosphere settled over the group as the sound of the door opening echoed through the basement.

“No one’s going to give you penalty points for being hungry,” Zenos said, confused, holding his own shoulder. “Hunger is a matter of survival, you know. Back in the day, I had to memorize stuff like the spots where people threw out

their leftovers, or which mushrooms I could eat without dying.”

“Dude, seriously. What kind of life have you led?”

“Look, never mind that. Door’s open. Let’s grab what we need.”

Zenos motioned for the students to go ahead. Ryan led the way, followed by a reluctant Eleanor. Ilya took the rear, glancing around nervously. Only Charlotte and Zenos remained at the door.

“Why are you spacing out?” Charlotte asked as Zenos stared at the backs of the students.

“Oh, uh... I just think something’s off.”

“How come?”

“I’ve only been a teacher for a short while, but I’ve been wondering... One or two, sure, but *four* homeroom teachers to the same class disappearing without a word to their students? Isn’t that weird? I’d at least have said my goodbyes.”

“Well, the students were giving them grief. Maybe they didn’t want to say their goodbyes.”

“The students were giving them grief, huh?” Zenos mumbled. He thought for a moment. When had all of this started? How? He stared into the distance for a while, then shook his head with a sigh. “Well, thinking about it won’t help. Let’s go.” He looked at Charlotte next to him, who was wearing a serious expression. “Is something wrong? Are you scared of going inside?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. *I* would never be scared of something as trivial as a dimly lit room,” she retorted, clearly unwilling to admit her fear.

“Right. Of course not.” Zenos gave her a small smile and moved to follow the students already inside.

“Hey...” Charlotte called out. “You were talking about saying your goodbyes earlier. Your term’s almost over, right?”

“Yeah. It’ll be done in a week.”

“What are you going to do?”

“About what?”

“Well, I could ask my father to extend it for you, and—” Charlotte caught herself and stopped mid-sentence. “Oh, never mind.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you once said that when offering help, it’s important to consider whether the other person would appreciate it.”

“Right. I did say that.” That had been the day Charlotte offered to replace the simple lunch Lily had packed him with something prepared by her butler. Zenos placed a hand on his hip, smiling awkwardly. “But then you went and gave Ryan a cookie at a really weird time.”

“W-Well, I was simply being considerate of his circumstances! A treat was the only way to comfort him at the time.”

Zenos took a step forward, then slowly turned back to look at her. “You know, I feel like you’ve changed a little.”

“Have I?”

“Before the surgery on your cheek, you came across as a very prickly girl. And when I first arrived at the academy, you seemed a bit more overbearing.”

“Hmph. And? I have every right to be overbearing. If I’m not, who else will be? Noblesse oblige—it’s both the privilege and the duty of the upper nobility. My conduct as a first-rate noble is part of why I’m in Class F to serve as an example.”

“Well, that is certainly very like you,” Zenos remarked, smiling faintly.

Charlotte stared directly at him. “Let us address the elephant in the room. What *are* you, exactly?”

“What do you mean?”

“At first, I thought you to be merely a healing magic expert. I wondered what kind of man you were. But then you handled the problem class effortlessly, did all sorts of chores, and before I knew it, you were even setting the troublemakers straight. The more I learn about you, the less I understand.”

Zenos was quiet for a moment, then replied in a serene tone, “I get it. One of these days, I’ll tell you everything.”

Something had been on his mind lately. Unlike back when he'd infiltrated the Royal Institute of Healing, this time he was dealing with students. It felt wrong to build his entire identity on lies. He knew that, eventually, he'd have to share at least some of the truth with them.

As they moved to enter the pantry, Charlotte murmured, "You know, if I've changed, it's because you—"

"Hmm? Did you say anything?"

"N-No. Come, let us hurry."

The pair went inside. The room, faintly lit by light-elemental manastones, was vast, with rows of neatly lined up shelves. Since this was a storage space for food, there was also an abundance of refrigerating manastones in use, making the place freezing cold.

Zenos called out for the other three students, and a reply came from deeper inside. Ryan was struggling to cut out a piece of ice from a shelf stacked with rectangular ice blocks.

"Ryan," Eleanor said, watching the young man with an unreadable expression. She seemed less than enthusiastic, despite being the one who had requested the ice. "It's fine. You don't have to."

"I don't want you passing out from the heat again," Ryan reasoned.

Ilya abruptly looked up, then glanced around. "Did anyone else hear that weird sound?"

"Oh, don't say such things," Eleanor said with a frown. "You're bringing back creepy memories."

"Creepy memories?"

"W-Well, the piano in the music room was playing by itse—"

"Shh!" Zenos brought a finger to his lips, cutting them off. "Ilya's right. I hear something too."

A distant sound echoed through the silence that followed, like a heavy object scraping against the floor.

“Wait,” Charlotte said. “This sound...!”

“No!” Eleanor exclaimed as though remembering something, suddenly running off. She was swinging her arms and raising her knees in a full sprint—something unusual for a noble girl.

Seeing her panic, the others quickly followed suit.

When they finally reached the entrance, Eleanor let out a small groan and dropped to her knees. “Oh no...”

The thick metal door to the pantry had completely closed, sealing the group inside.

“This is the worst,” Eleanor muttered for what felt like the tenth time this week as she stood before the tightly sealed door.

After hearing from Hanks—the homeroom teacher of Class D—about how he’d almost gotten sealed inside the food storage room, Eleanor had hatched a plan to bring her own homeroom teacher here and trick him into getting locked inside. It would’ve given him a huge scare *and* caused him to miss class, which would’ve likely resulted in his evaluation dropping harshly. If it all had gone well, he could’ve even been fired.

But her plan had gone awry—on the way to the storage, they’d run into her classmates and she’d had no choice but to play innocent and follow along. Then, while thinking of a way to postpone her plan, she’d heard a strange noise in the distance, and now they were trapped. She should’ve anticipated this! Hanks had *told* her the reason he’d almost gotten stuck in this room was that the door’s mechanism was faulty.

“Wh-What now?!” Ilya asked in a panic.

“Do something, all of you,” Charlotte commanded, remaining composed.

“Hold on. I’m pretty sure the door can be opened from the inside,” Ryan pointed out, stepping forward to operate the number pad next to the door. After a few unsuccessful attempts, however, he muttered in disbelief, “I can’t do it. The code I know isn’t working.”

Ilya paled. “What...? But it opened when we came in, didn’t it?”

“It’s no use. I heard that the mechanism to open the door from the inside is broken,” Eleanor explained in a shaky voice, recounting what Hanks had told her.

“Oh, come on! Seriously?!” Ryan snapped. He struggled for a bit trying to get the door to open, but eventually gave up and shook his head. “Crap. It’s not budging.”

Thanks to the light manastones in the room, they could still see, but an oppressive silence filled the air. It was hard to breathe.

“Step back for a sec, all of you,” said the homeroom teacher, who’d been standing a little further away. “*Scalpel.*” With the incantation, a white glowing blade appeared in his right hand. It quickly grew in size, turning into a sword as tall as a person.

“What the hell?!”

“It’s a blade made of mana,” the homeroom teacher explained calmly. “It’s dangerous, so step back a little further.” With that, he dashed toward the door. “I hope I don’t need to indemnify anyone for this,” he muttered, though what he meant was unclear.

He swung the blade downward, but the door remained steadfast. A shrill metallic sound echoed through the air as several green lines formed a rigid, latticelike structure on the surface of the door as if to protect it.

“What’s this?” the teacher asked. “There’s some kind of strange barrier.”

Still holding the brightly glowing sword, he ran a hand along the door.

“I see. The door’s operated by a magical device, so it comes with a magical barrier equipped. That’s annoying.” He crossed his arms with a groan. “This is bad. I can chip away at the walls, but they’re pretty thick. This will take a while.”

“W-We don’t have that kind of time!” Eleanor said, feeling the blood drain from her face. The air in the room was ice cold, their breaths coming out in white puffs. At this rate, they could freeze to death within an hour.

Ilya rubbed her hands together, speaking in a deliberately hopeful tone. “B-

But someone will notice we're missing and come rescue us, right?"

"I dunno," Ryan replied. "We have a reputation as troublemakers already. They'll probably just think we're goofing around somewhere."

Now even more anxious, Ilya glanced at Charlotte. "Still, Lady Charlotte is missing. Surely..."

"I wouldn't be so certain," Charlotte interjected. "I always go for tea after school, so I've already let my father and servants know that I'd be home late. I even expressly told them not to bother me. They'll probably come looking when it gets dark, however."

It was still lunchtime. Not even the guards would bother coming down to the underground food storage at this hour.

"Wh-What now?!" Eleanor asked, her lips trembling.

"Well, it's not like we don't have any options," the teacher pointed out. The sword he'd conjured was already gone somehow. He crossed his arms and looked at Eleanor. "Hey, Eleanor, can you use fire magic?"

Eleanor's red eyes grew wide.

"Use fire magic to warm up the room and buy us some time. In the meantime, I'll figure something out."

"Oh, yeah! Great idea," Ryan said.

Eleanor shook her head, her voice strained as she spoke. "I-I can't! I..." She clenched her fists tightly, feeling Ilya and Charlotte's gazes on her. "I...can't use magic anymore, okay?" she murmured weakly, lowering her head.

"Is it because of the burn on your right arm?" the teacher asked unexpectedly.

Instinctively, Eleanor clutched her arm, her eyes now fully wide with shock. "How... How do you know about that?"

"I just had a feeling—now you've confirmed it. Back in the music room, you were half-undressed, but still kept your right arm fully covered with your jacket to make sure nobody could see it. I figured that was weird. Of all the places to keep covered, why your arm? And then there's the fact you've been wearing

long sleeves every day through the summer. So I thought it could be a burn or something along those lines.”

Eleanor fell silent. She’d been hiding the burn scar for so many years, making sure none of her classmates noticed. Yet, in just two months, this man had seen through her and uncovered the truth about it so easily.

“Is that what happened?” Ryan murmured, his expression serious.

Ilya, too, looked at Eleanor with a worried expression.

Charlotte, meanwhile, was stoic—it was hard to tell what she was thinking.

Still holding her right arm, Eleanor exhaled a white puff of breath and began a quiet explanation. “I used to be able to do it, you know. Way back, fire magic was second nature to me. My parents, my teachers, they all praised me. Then, on the night of my graduation from secondary school, my homeroom teacher suggested something. He said I should shoot a big flame up into the sky, like fireworks, to surprise everyone.”

And Eleanor, who’d secretly had a crush on that teacher, had gone along with his plan. She’d raised both hands toward the sky, focused her mind, steadied her breathing. She’d ignited her mana, and then...the spell had backfired.

Luckily, she’d cast the spell from an isolated spot—to surprise everyone—and so she hadn’t injured anyone else in the process. However, a painful burn had remained on her right arm. The teacher who’d suggested the stunt, afraid of facing consequences, had fled the school. Since that day, she’d no longer been able to trust any of her teachers.

“I... I want to do it again. If I’m going to be the next head of House Freysard, I need to be able to use fire magic by my birthday. If I can’t, my cousin will be the next head, and they’ll cast me out,” she continued. “But I can’t do it. Every time I try, my arm hurts so badly, and the memory of that day flashes into my mind, and I can’t breathe—”

Eleanor clutched her chest, gasping for air in a silent scream.

The fire magic she’d once used so freely had turned on her because of that foolish attempt at showing off. Fire hated her now. Her anguished groans echoed through the cold air.

Casually, Charlotte spoke up, cutting through the chill. “So you’d be fine if the burn was gone?” she asked, as simply as one might suggest eating cake in the absence of bread. Spoken like a true daughter of one of the seven great noble houses.

“You say that like it’s so easy!” Eleanor snapped. “I even went to the Royal Institute of Healing for help, but they said only the saintess could heal something like this!”

The saintess was a mysterious woman known as the ultimate healer, but she wasn’t someone a low-ranking noble like Eleanor could meet with easily. The elite healers were all busy, either treating higher-ranking nobles, wandering who knows where, or operating in the battlefields at the border. Eleanor had been told that, for non-life-threatening conditions, the wait to see someone could be years.

“Do you understand? There’s no one who could heal my burn in time—”

“But there is,” Charlotte interrupted, pointing at the healing magic teacher. “Right there.”

The teacher let out a small sigh. “It’s not that simple.”

“I mean, you can definitely do it, no?”

“It’s not impossible, but healing magic can only aid the body’s natural ability to regenerate itself. Fresh wounds are easier to deal with, but an old wound where the cells have completely died out, like a burn, is another story. To remove the burn entirely, I’d have to cut away all the damaged skin and regenerate the healthy cells. It’d be a pretty complicated surgery.”

“Cut away the burn and regenerate the skin? Th-There’s no way you could do that!” Eleanor said. Not even the Royal Institute of Healing had mentioned such a treatment, after all.

“I, too, thought it would be impossible,” Charlotte said, maintaining a serene expression as she pressed her index finger against her cheek. “Say, I’m beautiful, don’t you think?”

“What? Is now the time to ask that?”

“I *am* beautiful. But there was a time when I had a tumor deeply embedded into my skin.”

Eleanor gasped.

Charlotte glanced sideways at their teacher before continuing, “But that man over there healed me fully. So, don’t worry. Or do you not trust *me*, of all people?”

As Eleanor stood there in stunned silence, the teacher took a step closer and spoke. “I feel like I should have a say in this, but whatever. Eleanor, you don’t trust teachers, right?”

“I-I don’t! Teachers are—”

“When I’m standing in the classroom in front of my students, I’m a teacher, yeah. You don’t need to trust me as a teacher. Hell, I don’t trust me as a teacher.” He paused, then continued in a calm tone as though he hadn’t just said something outrageous. “But in front of a patient, I’m a healer. And if you want to be my patient, then I ask that you at least trust me as a healer.”

“Eleanor...” Ryan murmured, his expression stern as he met her gaze. He’d told her that this teacher was different from the others. Ilya and Charlotte had said the same thing.

It was terrifying. Terrifying, but...just once. Just this once, maybe she could trust her teacher. But could she really...? Eleanor hesitated, unable to take that final step.

Charlotte nodded slowly. “I felt the same way. I didn’t want to allow anyone to cut into my cheek. But I wanted to look like myself again, dance at balls again. So don’t think of this as helping us, or as a means of getting out of here. Make this choice for *yourself*. Do *you* want to use fire magic again or not?”

“I...do!” Eleanor exclaimed, the words bursting out with surprising force. She pressed her lips together for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll do it. I’ll do it!”

“All right. Normally I’d charge for this, but consider this a special student’s discount,” the homeroom teacher said. He glanced around the cold, cramped food storage room, and spoke quickly. “We don’t have much time, so let’s get started.”

And thus, amid the freezing cold, the preparations for surgery on the young girl began.

“Ilya, will you assist me?” Zenos asked.

“Y-Yes!”

The group had stacked wooden crates found in the storage room to create an improvised bed, then laid Eleanor down on it. While making contact with Ilya, who stood opposite him, Zenos spoke to Eleanor. “Let me see your right arm.”

Eleanor hesitated for a moment, then silently pulled her sleeve up to her shoulder, revealing an extensive burn scar stretching from her wrist to her upper arm. The skin had peeled off, leaving the flesh red and wrinkled, and some areas were darker than others.

The remaining students audibly gasped, but no one said a word.

Now, where do I start...? Zenos wondered.

He could cut off the entire arm and regenerate it, but Eleanor was a mage. Magic was a delicate affair, and the arm through which the caster channeled their mana was extremely important. Even the slightest difference in the positioning of blood vessels and nerves could alter sensation and affect the flow of mana. And, in an environment as cold as this, cellular regeneration would be limited. Thus, he needed to keep the incision as small as possible to minimize the area requiring regeneration.

“Scalpel.”

Glowing white magic blade in hand, Zenos began the procedure.

“Are you ready, Eleanor?”

“Y-Yes,” she stammered. Her lips were a bluish hue, and surely not just from the cold.

Zenos didn’t have his usual sedatives available, so the surgery would need to be performed with the girl fully conscious. While he planned on numbing her pain with magic, the fear had to be overwhelming for someone her age.

He turned to the large student behind him, who was looking on worriedly. “Ryan, can you hold Eleanor’s left hand?”

“Huh? Wh-Why me?!”

“You’re her classmate, right? Ilya is assisting with the surgery, and I need someone strong like you to hold Eleanor still if she moves.”

Ryan mumbled something under his breath, but moved to Eleanor’s side. “F-Fine. Whatever. Eleanor, I’m grabbing your hand.”

“...Okay.” She extended her left hand without looking at him, and Ryan took it. Despite the freezing air, there seemed to be a faint dusting of pink on both their cheeks.

“What are you grinning at, Ilya?” Zenos asked.

“Oh! Um! I’m not grinning at all!” Ilya exclaimed.

“Well, all right. Let’s get started. *Heal!*”

Eleanor’s entire right arm was enveloped by a white light. Zenos took a deep breath and held the scalpel’s tip to the boundary between the scar and the healthy skin. Carefully assessing how deep the scar tissue ran, he began cutting through the epidermis, dermis, and the deeper layers of skin. He quickly cast a protective spell on the wound to minimize pain, bleeding, and the risk of infection, then immediately switched back to healing magic, regenerating the damaged skin.

The white light sparkled and shimmered in the air, mingling with the mist of their breath, creating an enchanting scene in the room.

“Wow,” Ilya whispered softly as she dabbed at the small bits of blood with a handkerchief.

But—

“This is rough,” Zenos muttered, pausing the procedure to rotate his right arm several times. He dispelled the scalpel and repeatedly opened and closed his fingers.

His precision with the scalpel was dulling over time. While he’d performed many procedures before, none of them had been done in a freezing

environment like this. His fingers were growing numb, making it hard to move them the way he wanted.

“Mr. Xeno,” Ilya said with a nervous expression. “I... I can hold your hand, if you’d like.”

“Hmm?”

“Oh! Um, I don’t mean anything by it. I was just thinking that warming it up might help. I’m your assistant, so if there’s anything I can do...”

“Right. Good idea. That’d help a lot.” Ilya was observant, Zenos noted—an important trait for a healer. He extended his right hand, which Ilya hesitantly took.

“Wow... A healer’s hand...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I-I’m sorry! I just got a little emotional.”

“W-Wait a moment, Ilya! I will help too!” a strangely flustered Charlotte exclaimed, gripping Zenos’s left hand forcefully. Her cool touch wrapped around his fingers and, without looking at him, she said, “Y-You should be grateful. Getting to touch me is a once-in-a-millennium event.”

“Yeah. I appreciate it, and— Uh, Ilya? You’re grinning again.”

“I-It’s nothing!”

Now Ryan was holding the hand of the patient, Eleanor, while the other two female students were holding the hands of the surgeon, Zenos. It would’ve looked absurd to an onlooker. But, thanks to the girls’ efforts, a bit of warmth returned to Zenos’s fingers.

“Thanks, both of you. I think I can manage now. Sorry about the interruption, Eleanor.” Zenos let go of their hands and once again began to flex his fingers, ready to resume.

With a deep breath, he turned back to the patient. Thanks to Ilya and Charlotte, he could give the surgery all his attention. Focused only on his fingers and the wound, Zenos gradually forgot about the cold. He cast healing and protective magic alternately to safeguard the tissues, sending a flurry of white

and green lights through the air, flickering and overlapping in a colorful dance.

No one said a word. Eleanor had her eyes shut as she underwent the procedure, but everyone else was mesmerized by Zenos's otherworldly skill. Even if anyone had tried to speak, he was so focused on the burn that he wouldn't have noticed. His attention was on every peripheral nerve, every capillary, as he carefully guided them back to their proper state.

Finally, the surgery was successfully completed.

"No way," Eleanor muttered in disbelief, staring at her now flawless right arm. "This can't be real."

Zenos stretched his neck and arms with a smile. "That must've been hard. You did great, staying perfectly still. I finished quicker than I thought I would."

"Um, Mr. Xeno, I'm... Um..." Eleanor struggled to find the right words as she looked at Zenos, still holding her newly healed arm with her left hand.

Ryan grinned, giving Eleanor a light tap on the shoulder. "Sorry, but we don't have time to get emotional. You've got something important you need to do, don't you?"

Eleanor gazed silently at Ryan for a moment, then pressed her lips together with a slow nod. "Yeah." She pushed off the makeshift bed and stood, her heart pounding loudly in her chest.

Fire magic—the requirement to become the next head of the Freysard family. Her arm had healed perfectly, but she was still anxious. She hadn't cast a spell in years. The memory of her last spell backfiring flashed in her mind, and her entire body began to visibly tremble.

What if she still couldn't use magic?

"It's okay," Zenos assured her gently, interrupting her thoughts. "You may not have been able to cast spells, but you've been practicing and refining your mana this whole time, haven't you?"

Eleanor's red eyes widened. "H-How do you know that?"

"When we met in the back lawn that one morning, I told you I could sense something off about the raw mana around us, right? That was proof that your

internal mana resonated with the mana particles around you. If you can do that much, all that's left is to actually unleash it."

Her classmates all began to chime in too.

"Well, if anyone can do it, it's you," Ryan said in an intentionally cheery tone.

"You can do it, Eleanor," Ilya agreed, pumping her fists for emphasis.

"I don't understand the subject matter that well, but maybe you're overthinking it," Charlotte added, looking bored.

Eleanor couldn't help herself. "Pfft."

Ryan frowned in annoyance. "Hey! We're trying to cheer you up here! What's so funny?!"

"It's just... You all look so calm, but your lips are turning purple."

They're good people, she thought to herself. Even in this situation, freezing and clearly waiting for her fire magic, none of them had pressured her to hurry up. Eleanor had felt isolated ever since losing her magic—but maybe it was she who'd built walls around herself.

Slowly, she raised both hands above her head and closed her eyes, focusing her mind. The warmth she felt in her heart began to grow, like a campfire being stoked. Her mana, tinged with heat, flowed through the perfectly healed nerves and blood vessels in her arm, gathering at her palms.

"Flame Ring!" she chanted as though expelling all of her pent-up frustration.

Immediately, crimson light swirled at her fingertips, transforming into a blazing flame. One, then two, then many more fireballs formed, slowly drawing a circle in the air.

"I... I did it?" She stared at the roaring flames in disbelief. "I did it. I did it. I really..." Tears began to flow from her eyes, falling onto the floor one after the other.

In the cold of the silver-tinged food storage, a warm, glowing space was born.

"Oooh!" Ryan exclaimed. "It's so warm!"

"I-I feel like I'm being brought back to life..." Ilya murmured.

“Well. Not bad,” Charlotte remarked casually.

After watching her classmates react, Eleanor wiped her cheeks and bowed her head to her teacher. “Um... I’m... I’m sorry about my actions.”

“I don’t remember you causing me enough problems to warrant an apology...” Zenos scratched his head, then gave a small laugh and raised his right hand slightly. “Well, if this counts as giving life advice, I’m happy.”

Ryan and Ilya raised their own right hands in turn.

After glancing around, Charlotte hesitantly lifted her right hand as well. “What kind of ritual is this?”

Eleanor exchanged a modest high five with each of them.

All their hands were cold as ice. Yet, compared to the hands offered to her out of duty when she’d first retreated into her shell, these felt much warmer.

Chapter 6: Zenos, the Teacher

“Man... We’re finally out of there.”

By the time Zenos and his four students had managed to escape the freezing room, the clock’s minute hand had already done two full rotations.

Since dismantling magical barriers wasn’t his specialty, Zenos had quickly given up on using the actual door and instead gradually chipped away at the thick wall next to it with his enlarged scalpel. Eleanor had bought the group time with her fire magic, and the healer had managed to create a path to the underground tunnel.

“I’m glad everyone’s safe, but sheesh, this is gonna cost a good bit,” Zenos grumbled as he stared at the damaged wall. A large portion of it had been destroyed to create their escape route; while they’d blocked it off with rubble to keep the cold air from escaping, the damage was too extensive. The wall would need repairs.

Charlotte brushed the back of her hand along her chestnut hair. “Don’t worry about it. House Fennel can handle such minor damages.”

“Oh. Makes sense.”

“A mere wall in the academy versus my personal safety. There’s no need to weigh which is more important, is there?”

“Guess not,” Zenos admitted.

“Nope,” Ryan conceded.

“There isn’t,” Eleanor agreed.

“There really isn’t,” Ilya concurred.

“Why does the number of sycophants keep increasing?” Charlotte huffed. “And Ilya! You too?”

“I-I’m sorry. It just came out...”

“Honestly. Even the members of Class A don’t speak to me that way. This class truly is something else.” Charlotte glared at the group, then shrugged. She seemed to be getting used to the treatment, and didn’t seem all that angry.

“Mr. Xeno, we should report this incident to the academy, right?” Ilya asked.

“Well, normally that’d be the right thing to do, but...” Zenos turned back to the entrance of the food storage room.

“Is something bothering you?”

“Well, not really. I was just wondering how the door closed.”

“I heard the hinges are malfunctioning, so the door shuts on its own,” Eleanor explained.

Zenos folded his arms, gazing off into space for a moment before turning back to his students. “Hold off on that report for a bit, if you can. There’s something I want to check first.”

Moments later, a shadowy figure appeared in the academy’s underground. The figure moved quickly toward the food storage, glancing around cautiously, and operated the number pad next to the door. With a low hum, the device glowed blue, and the two halves of the thick door slid apart with a creak.

The figure peeked inside, then cautiously entered the room. Slowly advancing through the vast, frigid space filled with white mist, the figure looked around, scanning their surroundings. Rubbing their arms to ward off the cold, they continued deeper into the storage room. They checked the passages, behind the shelves, and around the corners, meticulously examining the area.

They then tilted their head in confusion. This was odd; what they were looking for wasn’t here. Could it be even further in?

With a growing sense of unease, the figure started to move forward again—and then they noticed something. A strange sound in the distance, like something heavy was moving.

“...No.”

A sinking feeling washed over the figure. They spun on their heels and

sprinted back down the frost-covered passage, the freezing air burning their throat with every gasping breath. But, just as the figure reached the entrance to the storage room, the door loudly slammed shut.

“Why?!” the figure shouted, pressing their hands against the cold door with a groan. Dressed in only a thin layer of clothing, they were already chilled to the bone.

But the figure quickly pressed a hand to their chest, taking several deep breaths. It was fine. There was no need to panic. The door had been designed to be opened from the inside in case someone got accidentally trapped.

Watching their fingertips carefully, the figure pressed a series of numbers on the pad next to the door in sequence. Eventually, the number pad glowed blue and the door slowly started to slide open.

The figure began to sigh in relief, but the sound quickly turned into a startled “Whoa!” at the sight of a man clad in a pitch-black cloak standing outside the door, blocking the figure’s path.

Gazing at the figure with a sorrowful expression, the man murmured, “So it was you who locked us in, Hanks.”

A man with a neat, clean-cut appearance and slicked-back brown hair emerged from the food storage room: It was Hanks, Zenos’s fellow colleague and the homeroom teacher of Class D.

“M-Mr. Xeno? How...?” he stammered in shock, eyes wide open.

“Surprised I managed to escape that room unscathed?” asked Zenos. His tone, in contrast to Hanks’s, was calm and composed.

“Huh? N-No...” Hanks coughed to clear his throat. “Wh-What are you talking about? I was simply startled because you appeared out of nowhere.”

“Can you drop the act? You’re the one who locked us in there.”

Hanks reached behind his neck and let out an exaggerated sigh. “Come on, now... Don’t make ridiculous accusations. I was just checking on the food storage. If supplies run low, the vice principal will give me an earful.”

“Or maybe you came to check whether the people you’d trapped in there had frozen to death,” Zenos countered. “I figured if someone had locked us in, they’d be back eventually to check, so I hid here and waited.”

Hanks fell silent.

“You told Eleanor that the door was faulty and you’d almost gotten trapped yourself, right?” Zenos pointed out, crossing his arms. “You tried to bait her into trapping me. And while she did try to, other students happened to follow along, so you had no choice but to lock us all in.”

“W-Wait a second, Mr. Xeno.” Hanks raised both hands in a placating gesture. “You’re not making any sense. Sure, I did tell Eleanor that, but I was just making small talk. And you said there were students locked in the storage room too? Where are they?”

“They weren’t doing well, so I sent them to the infirmary.”

“The infirmary...”

Zenos averted his gaze from Hanks and turned toward the recently opened door of the food storage room. “You told Eleanor the door was faulty and nearly locked you in. But this door is controlled by a magical device, isn’t it? Can it really just close on its own?”

“If it’s malfunctioning, one would assume so, no? I mean, I got trapped just now, didn’t I?”

“That was me closing the door from the outside, just like you did to us.”

“Listen, I’m telling you, I didn’t lock anyone i— Wait, did you say you were the one who closed it just now? Why?! I could’ve frozen to death!” Hanks protested in shock.

“But you made it out just fine,” Zenos pointed out, his eyes narrowing.

“W-Well, yes, but still...!”

“And yet the device to open the door from within is broken, isn’t it?”

Hanks’s eyes widened.

“That’s what you told Eleanor. That the door was faulty and closing on its

own, and that the mechanism for opening the door from the inside was broken. That's how you gave her the idea of trapping me." In reality, he'd simply changed the passcode for the mechanism inside the room. "You've just proven that you lied. You used the supposedly broken device to get out, just like that."

Hanks said nothing.

Frigid air leaked into the underground passageway from the still-open storage, sharp and biting against the skin. Zenos speculated that Hanks had likely tampered with the temperature settings inside the storage room as well, lowering it to the point that anyone inside would freeze to death quickly.

Though Hanks's expression didn't change, the light in his eyes went ominously dim. He surveyed his surroundings, then shrugged wearily. "What a bother. I'd planned for you to exit the stage here."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Class F is such a nuisance," he muttered, his dark eyes gazing into the void. "A perfect academy like this has no place for defects like them, wouldn't you agree?"

"What does that have to do with you trapping me?"

"You're a bit slow, aren't you? You're their *fifth* homeroom teacher. They've driven out four others before you, and each time, the entire class was given the maximum of ten penalty points. Driving out a homeroom teacher is an act unbecoming of any academy student."

"What? What do you mean?!" came a voice from behind a pillar. The group of students that had been hiding behind it appeared one after the other, looking flustered.

Recognizing Ilya, Ryan, Eleanor, and Charlotte, Hanks let out a shallow sigh. "So the infirmary thing was a lie. Well played." His eyes gleamed dangerously with what could only be described as murderous intent.

Ryan lashed out at Hanks. "Hey! How come we've never heard of this ten point thing?! It's in the rules that students need to be informed when that happens!"

“The rule states the homeroom teacher informs the students,” Hanks countered coldly. “Since you drove them away, they couldn’t inform you, obviously.”

Zenos clapped his hands as though figuring something out. “I see. I get it now. I’m the fifth, so if I get driven out, everyone gets expelled.”

If a student accumulated fifty penalty points over the course of a year, they got expelled. Class F had already driven out four homeroom teachers, so each of them had forty points minimum. If they drove out Zenos, their fifth teacher, the extra ten points would mean everyone in the class would be pushed to the fifty-point threshold.

Finally, the source of the unease Zenos had felt over the missing teachers was clear. Their disappearance had been part of Hanks’s plan, orchestrated to expel all of Class F as per the academy’s rules.

“I figured trapping several students with me was a dumb move, but I guess you were running out of time and panicked.” The rule stated that the fifty points had to be accumulated over the course of a year, and the school year at Ledelucia Academy lasted from October to July. Only a few days remained before the end of July—and thus the deadline—arrived.

Hanks cast a contemptuous glance at Ryan. “As a citizen of this country, I want the ruling class to be perfect. I can’t stand failures acting all high and mighty just because they have blue blood.”

“You bastard!” Ryan shouted.

“So all the incidents involving the previous homeroom teachers leaving were secretly your doing, huh?” Zenos asked, using one hand to stop Ryan from pouncing on Hanks.

Hanks nodded nonchalantly. “Correct. I manipulated each of the new homeroom teachers, telling them that Class F was full of failures. I stirred up tension by making students’ textbooks vanish, hiding knives in the teachers’ desks, and subtly suggesting ways for the students to harass them. I even planted the newspaper in Eleanor’s desk and mentioned the food storage room to her.”

“Huh? Mr. Hanks, you were the one who threw my textbook out on the back lawn?” Ilya asked in shock.

“Y-You did all of it!” Eleanor accused, furious.

Taking note of the unsettling aura surrounding Hanks, Zenos confirmed his suspicions. “And if the students’ harassment wasn’t enough to drive away a teacher, you’d resort to using force yourself, huh?”

“Oh, you figured it out?” Hanks asked. “Maybe you’re not so slow after all. Yes, I would personally see to it that the thicker-skinned teachers got quietly taken care of, then pin the blame on the students. I mentioned before, right? My specialty is martial arts.” He cracked his knuckles, drawing closer. An unnatural smile was plastered on his face, and his gaze darkened further still.

“Wait a second!” Ryan snapped. “If you were the one pulling the strings all along, those penalty points are void!”

“You really are stupid,” Hanks retorted with a small smile. “Now that you know the truth, I have no intention of letting any of you leave here alive. At first, I focused on the teachers because harming lordlings would have been too much trouble. But while I was tailing all of you today, I realized something. I could lock all of you in here and get rid of the entire lot of problem students at once. Then, I’d get rid of the frozen bodies quickly, and the story would be that the homeroom teacher left due to Class F’s harassment, and the main culprits among the students mysteriously vanished.”

“You’re actually insane,” Zenos said.

“It’s a real shame, Mr. Xeno. I thought you and I could’ve been on the same page. Since coming to this academy, you can see how wide the gap is between nobles and commoners, can’t you? The least we can do is expel the useless nobles. That’s the only true form of education.”

Zenos stared sharply at the approaching Hanks. “Sorry, but I think I know a lot more about the unfairness of the class system than you. Still can’t agree with your approach to education, though.”

“Shut it! Eliminating the useless, maintaining the order at the academy—that’s my mission!” Hanks lunged at Zenos, closing the distance between them

in an instant. “Starting with you!”

He aimed a sharp hand chop at Zenos’s throat, but the healer twisted his body and dodged, countering with a palm strike of his own to Hanks’s jaw.

“Ngh!” Hanks groaned, eyes wide with shock. “Damn it. I let my guard down. My body must still be stiff from the cold,” he muttered under his breath.

Lowering his stance, he charged again with a powerful tackle. Zenos jumped to the side to dodge it, then brought down his elbow—hard—on the back of Hanks’s neck.

“Guh!” Hanks crashed face-first into the floor, writhing in pain for a moment. He quickly pushed himself back up, however, pressing a bloodied hand to his forehead. “Psh. Lucky you. My body hasn’t warmed up yet.”

“Really? Hope you warm up soon, then.”

“Shut your mouth!”

Hanks charged again, now practically oozing an aura of bloody murder—but Zenos’s skillful use of enhancement and protection magic kept him safe.

Eventually, the martial artist collapsed to his knees, panting heavily. “I-I was second place in the last Royal Capital Martial Arts Tournament! Wh-Who are you?!”

“Just a plain ol’ healing magic teacher,” Zenos replied calmly before turning to his students. “I’ll handle him. You go get the other teachers and the Royal Guard.”

The students exchanged silent glances for a moment, then turned on their heels all at once.

“W-Wait! Don’t go anywhere!” Hanks demanded, still on his knees. He stretched his right hand forward. “I’m your teacher! You need to do as I say!”

Naturally, the students didn’t stop or look back, disappearing down the underground passage.

“Looks like they’re not listening to you anymore,” Zenos pointed out.

Hanks stared blankly at the now empty corridor. His expression slowly grew

sorrowful, and he muttered through gritted teeth, “I-I can’t let it end like this. I haven’t finished my mission yet...”

Zenos gave him an inquisitive look.

Suddenly, Hanks reached into his coat and pulled out a syringe filled with dark red liquid. Eyes fixed on it desperately, he whispered, “Enough. I’ll just go all the way.”

“Hey!” Zenos called out, rushing over. “What’s tha—”

Before the healer could finish, Hanks suddenly stabbed the needle into his own arm. Immediately, his heart jerked with an audible thump, and he dropped to the floor, writhing and clawing at his throat. “Agh... Ughhh...!”

“Hey, Hanks!” Zenos shouted again.

Hanks abruptly stopped moving and slowly pushed to his feet. His eyes were bloodshot and bulging, as though they could pop out at any moment. Frothy saliva mixed with blood dripped from the corners of his mouth, and the muscles on his limbs pulsed violently, swelling larger with each beat of his heart.

Grotesque, half-formed limbs began to protrude from his shoulders and back, wriggling and winding.

“This is...”

Hanks let out a bestial roar, closing the distance between him and Zenos in a second. He grabbed Zenos roughly by the head and threw him into the open food storage room. “Graaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Zenos grunted as air whizzed past his ears. His head slammed into a shelf, scattering frozen food items around him.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Immediately, Hanks lunged again, swooping down on Zenos relentlessly, like a storm of whipping limbs. Zenos had a protective spell active, but the sheer number of blows made it hard to find an opening for a counterattack. He kept his arms raised to focus on blocking, trying to spot an opportunity to strike.

Hanks growled. One of his hands reached for a massive iron shelf from the back of the storage room and chucked it forward. The heavy structure—several

times Zenos's height—and everything on it went flying toward the healer, sending forth a rain of metal and frozen meats and fish.

“Whoa!” Zenos quickly jumped out of the way, but as he leaped into midair, Hanks struck his side with a powerful blow. “Gah!”

Powered by some unknown drug, Hanks had increased his strength and speed many times over, and now far surpassed his original martial arts skills. The blow pushed Zenos back into the path of the falling shelf, and a deafening crash echoed through the storage room as an overwhelming weight pressed down on his body, trapping him.

Hanks let out strange, hissing breaths for a few moments. Likely believing Zenos to be dead, he turned on his heel and began to walk away, his footsteps gradually fading into the distance.

“Damn it,” Zenos muttered, clicking his tongue from underneath the shelf. He wasn't dead, of course. His protective magic had saved him from being crushed, but the shelf was so heavy it was difficult to move.

The sudden transformation had reminded him of his battle against Dalitz, the director of the orphanage he'd grown up in. That brief moment of recognition had slowed his reaction time.

Where in blazes had Hanks gotten that strange drug?

No, I can worry about that later.

Hanks seemed to be losing his mind, and if he continued to rampage unchecked, the entire academy could be at risk. It was broad daylight, so Zenos couldn't count on a certain floating entity's help, and while the Royal Guard were dependable, they also likely weren't prepared for an enemy like this.

Twisting and turning in a desperate attempt to free himself, Zenos thought of his students.

“Please, be safe.”

Meanwhile, Charlotte and the other three Class F students had finally reached the top of the stairs leading up to the ground floor.

“Did anyone just hear that?” Ilya asked, nervously looking over her shoulder. “It sounded like an animal roaring...”

“I heard something, for sure,” Ryan said, furrowing his brows and straining to listen. “Wait, is this one of the Seven Mysteries of the Academy?”

“Let’s focus on what we need to do for now,” Eleanor urged the two.

Their homeroom teacher had told them to call for the other teachers and the Royal Guard. They’d decided to go to the Guard first, thinking that an external organization might be more trustworthy than the staff—since Hanks, the mastermind behind the homeroom teachers’ disappearances, was a teacher himself.

The Royal Guard was responsible for protecting the academy from external threats, so they were stationed near the gate. On their way there, the four students ran past classrooms with active lectures, indicating that afternoon classes had already started. They stepped out into the lawn, rushing under the midday sun toward the Royal Guard station.

And then something strange happened. A deafening, animalistic roar echoed around them.

“Huh...?”

They all stopped and turned back toward the exit of the first floor of the school’s main building. Standing near it was something...strange. It had arms, legs, a torso, and walked on two feet, making it look human—but its muscles were swollen to the point of bursting, and its height was nearly twice that of an adult.

“Wh-What *is* that?” Eleanor gasped, horrified by the sight of the writhing, grotesque, tentacle-like appendages sprouting from the thing’s shoulders and back. A small head sat atop its bloated body, still sporting neatly slicked-back brown hair.

“Is that Hanks?” Ryan muttered in disbelief.

The thing let out a ferocious growl like a carnivorous beast and began to slowly advance toward them.

“What happened to him?” Ilya asked, her face pale. “I-Is Mr. Xeno...?”

Charlotte bit down hard on her lip.

“Graaaaaaaah!” Hanks roared, recognizing the students and breaking into a sudden sprint toward them.

“What’s that monster?!”

“I-Is that a magical beast?!”

“I-I don’t know! I’ve never seen one!”

Startled by the roar, other students began to peek out of the windows of their classrooms, one after the other.

Charlotte raised her voice in alarm. “No! Get back inside!”

Instinctively reacting to the students’ movement, Hanks abruptly changed direction and leaped into the air, slamming his body into the wall of the building with a thunderous crash. Cracks began to spread across the stone wall, and the tentacles extending from Hanks’s body smashed through the windows, slithering their way inside the building.

Screams, shouts, and shrieks filled the air as the academy erupted into chaos as though a wasp’s nest had just been overturned. Several of the guards, alerted to the disturbance, rushed out from the nearby station without the students needing to call for help.

“What is *that*?” one of them asked. Even the trained guards were momentarily stunned by the sight. They quickly remembered their duty, however, falling into a line formation. “You four, stand back!”

They swiftly aimed their magical guns and fired in unison. Red streaks of magically charged bullets flew toward the monstrous creature clinging to the school wall. Three, four, five shots struck Hanks’s deformed body, tearing into his massive muscles. The impact caused him to slip from the wall and crash to the ground, and another barrage of bullets followed.

“Groooooooooaaaaar!”

A thunderous roar echoed through the air, making the ground shake. As the smoke from the bullets cleared, the creature stood again, seemingly unharmed.

No, not unharmed—chunks of flesh had clearly been blown off and lay scattered around the area. The creature wasn't invincible. It was *regenerating*.

The members of the Royal Guard gasped in shock. "What the...?"

"Graaaaaaaah!" With a powerful kick off the ground, Hanks charged at the guards, now seeing them as his enemies.

"I-It's coming!"

"Engage!"

The guards shifted to melee combat positions, but each punch and kick from the grotesquely swollen Hanks carried a terrifying amount of destructive power. On top of that, his tentacle-like appendages whipped relentlessly at the guards, leaving them with no means of stopping the onslaught. They went down one after the other.

"Come on! Let's get out of here!" Ryan snapped, one hand pushing Ilya's back and the other closing around Eleanor's wrist. The three began to sprint away, and then he realized they were missing someone. "What are you doing?!"

Charlotte hadn't moved an inch; she was still rooted in place. Most of the Royal Guard members had already been defeated, and the creature—presumably Hanks—looked a bit cautious as it scanned the area. It let out a deep growl and began to slowly close the distance between itself and the young noblewoman.

"Hurry!" Ryan shouted out to her.

"I'm not running," Charlotte said simply.

"Lady Charlotte!" Ilya called out in distress.

"Damn it!" Ryan cursed, preparing to run back to help their classmate. "She's frozen in fear!"

"Rude," Charlotte replied hoarsely. "I'm not frozen in fear." Her knees were trembling, but she stood her ground, turning her gaze toward the school building. "If we run away, that thing will attack the other students again. There are elementary and secondary school classrooms here. I will *not* let this monster ravage my academy!"

“This isn’t even your academy! And that doesn’t matter right now!”

“We’re not the ones who need to leave. *That creature* is. I mustn’t show weakness. I mustn’t cry. Demonstrating the resolve of a first-rate noble is part of why I came to Class F.”

“That’s not—”

“He said he’d handle things.”

Ryan, Ilya, and Eleanor blinked. “What?”

“Our homeroom teacher. He said he’d handle this man.”

“W-Well, yeah, but that didn’t work out! And now we’re in this mess!”

“He removed the tumor on my cheek.”

“What?”

Glaring at the menacing Hanks as he drew closer, Charlotte continued, “He taught Ilya healing magic.”

Ilya clasped her hands together. “Oh...”

“He saved Ryan from a group of thugs.”

“Hey, you’re...” Ryan trailed off, stopping as he was about to make a run for Charlotte.

“He made it so Eleanor could use fire magic again.”

Eleanor gasped.

“He’s handled things every time. He’ll figure something out!” Charlotte managed, her voice strained.

Hanks was now only a few steps away. The tentacles extending from his body twisted together in midair and bundled into a single mass, slowly lifting and ready to strike.

“Shit!” Ryan hissed. Before he could run toward Charlotte, however, she looked up, crying out to the sky.

“I’ve put my trust in him! So he needs to hurry and *do something!*”

“Groooooooooaaaaar!”

A massive blow came crashing down on her like a falling tree, and Charlotte reflexively closed her eyes. In that brief moment, many things flashed through her mind.

Her late mother. Her doting father. The first time she'd danced at a ball. And a black cloak, fluttering in the wind—

“Sorry I’m late. I’ll do something now.”

“Huh?”

“You were very brave. The surgery’s done.”

This was the same kind, gentle voice that had echoed in her ears when she'd had her cheek surgery. Slowly, Charlotte opened her eyes, and as it turned out, she hadn't imagined it. There was indeed a man before her, wearing a black cloak fluttering in the wind—her homeroom teacher.

Severed tentacles were scattered on the ground, and the monster—Hanks—was retreating, groaning in pain.

“T-Took you long enough! What would’ve happened if I’d gotten hurt?!” Charlotte demanded, struggling to hold back tears. A first-rate noble didn't cry in front of others, after all. Still, she had to clench her fists tightly to keep her tear ducts in check.

“For crying out loud, don’t do anything reckless! It just took me longer than I thought to get myself free, that’s all,” the homeroom teacher grumbled. “Still, I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Mr. Xeno!” Ilya called out.

“Dammit! Don’t just let us think something happened to you!” Ryan snapped.

“You’re alive,” Eleanor murmured.

The three finally returned to Charlotte’s side. Their teacher looked at the trio and said, “Sorry I scared you. Honestly, I still don’t really get what it means to be a teacher. I don’t know if the job’s about accepting challenges from students, or doing menial chores, or giving life advice, but...”

He turned back toward Hanks, who’d tried to get Class F expelled.

“One thing I know for sure is that this guy is wrong.”

Well, that's what I said, but...

Zenos watched Hanks from a distance. The man's dull gray eyes showed little sign of reason, which was likely why he was wary of the healer. When saving Charlotte, Zenos had cut off Hanks's tentacle-like appendages, but they'd since regenerated.

Regeneration. Pulsing muscles. Writhing tentacles. It was all very reminiscent of what had happened to former orphanage director Dalitz during his face-off against Zenos; the only difference was how much of Hanks's consciousness remained in comparison.

Hanks appeared to have transformed by injecting something into himself, but Zenos didn't know what it was or where the martial artist had gotten it. He presumed it had been acquired through the same channels as those used by Dalitz.

“Groooooaar!”

“Whoa.” Zenos deflected a tentacle with his scalpel, guiding Hanks away from the students and fallen guards. He'd secretly healed the guards enough to keep them alive, but not enough that they were able to stand. If they moved around recklessly, it would just mean more targets for Zenos to protect, which would complicate things.

“I can't handle this like I did with Dalitz,” Zenos mused.

Hanks's regeneration was likely happening through cancerous cells. Against Dalitz, Zenos had used healing magic to force those cells into overdrive, causing them to self-destruct. But in the academy, with students everywhere, using such a drastic measure was too dangerous.

“Grrr!” Perhaps sensing Zenos's hesitation, the previously cautious Hanks suddenly shifted to an offensive stance. Tentacles shot out from all over his body, attacking the healer from every direction.

“Damn!”

Zenos slashed at some of the tentacles and dodged others, continuing to evade the storm of blows. His only option was to keep attacking until Hanks's regeneration ability gave out, but he had no idea how long that would take.

The next moment, a ball of fire shot past Zenos's face, striking one of Hanks's tentacles. The healer turned to see a red-haired girl with her hand outstretched. "Eleanor!"

"I'm fighting too!"

"Groooooaar!"

Naturally, Hanks's next attack targeted Eleanor. Zenos rushed to her, but the tentacle never reached its final destination—Ryan swiftly grabbed a fallen guard's sword and cut the appendage down.

"Th-Thanks, Ryan," Eleanor stammered.

"Idiot!" Ryan snapped. "That was dangerous!"

"It was," Zenos agreed. "You two stay back." He continued to dodge the tentacles while slashing at Hanks with his magically enlarged scalpel as he rushed toward the two of them.

Eleanor shook her head. "You're fighting him, right, Mr. Xeno? The more the merrier, no?"

"Well, sure, but this is dangerous," Zenos argued quickly, trying to reason with her.

Eleanor wasn't convinced, however, and Ryan sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Great. Now's the worst time for you to act like the fearless kid from back in elementary school..."

"Well, it's only logical that she would," Charlotte remarked. "Very well, then. Show him what Class F can do."

"Don't encourage them, Charlotte!" Zenos chided.

Ilya held back a laugh. "Pfft..."

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, it's just, even in this situation, everyone's acting like they normally do

now that you're here, Mr. Xeno. I think we're all relieved," she explained with a smile.

"Listen, we're not out of the woods yet," Zenos muttered, shifting his focus back to Hanks, who was slowly regenerating and trying to rise.

Ryan raised his sword, psyching himself up. "Well, a knight can't turn tail and let the girls do all the fighting, can he?"

"A knight should be listening to me." Zenos ran a hand through his hair. "No one in this class ever listens. How did things get to this point, again...?"

"You did this."

"He sure did."

"What other explanation is there?"

"Seriously?" Zenos groaned.

Ilya giggled again, smiling. "Class F was always divided, but ever since you became our homeroom teacher, we've started coming together bit by bit. And I think now, for the first time, we're all united by one desire—helping you."

"Helping me...?" he echoed quietly before letting out a deep sigh. "All right. Fine. But at least listen to me while we're fighting. Eleanor, cast fire spells from a distance. Ryan, protect the girls and cut down the tentacles. Ilya, lay low and heal the guards."

"Understood," Eleanor said.

"You got it!" Ryan exclaimed.

"Okay!" Ilya replied.

The three of them nodded energetically.

At this point, Zenos had no choice. At least the palace guards could still contribute. He'd already partially healed them, so Ilya's spells should be enough to revive them fully.

Charlotte glared at him. "What about me?"

"You...cheer us on."

“Cheer you on? What a mundane role.”

“Everyone contributes the way they can. So do what you’re able. Boosting morale is a role only you can play.”

Charlotte crossed her arms and nodded reluctantly. “Hmph. Very well, then. My support is worth a hundred extra soldiers. Victory is practically a given.”

“Yeah,” Zenos agreed.

“Yup,” Ryan added.

“That’s right,” Eleanor remarked.

“Indeed,” Ilya said.

“Oh, you’re all just agreeing with everything again!” Charlotte protested. “But fine. I’m used to it by now.”

The healing magic teacher and the “failures” from Class F exchanged looks, then turned their eyes toward the monster that was now rising again.

“All right! Let’s go, Class F!”

“Graaaaaaaaaah!”

The air vibrated with the force of Hanks’s roar.

Zenos pushed off the ground, slicing through the barrage of tentacles. From the rear, Eleanor launched fireball after fireball, providing cover for Zenos as the pair rained attacks on Hanks. Ryan fought off the swarm of tentacles rushing in from the gaps between the fiery explosions, and Ilya darted toward the fallen soldiers of the Royal Guard.

“What’s happening?” Ryan asked. “My body feels so light!”

That was because Zenos had cast an enhancement spell on the young man. Of course, he didn’t forget to also cast protective spells on all of the students, ensuring they remained safe over the course of the fight. During his days as an adventurer, Zenos had supported his party in a similar manner—and likewise when fighting the golem in the slums, or aiding the demi-humans in combat. And now, somehow here he was, providing battle support for the students of a

noble academy.

This time, however, he couldn't afford to stay in the rear and let the students take the vanguard. Instead, he fought on the front lines, keeping up the protective and enhancement spells to safeguard the others. It was a lot of work, but Zenos couldn't help feeling a sense of pride swelling in his chest as he watched them.

Every day they grew a bit more. Diligently. Earnestly. They'd once been called failures, and here they were, fighting together.

"Master... I think I finally understand why you taught us so much," he muttered to himself.

Meanwhile, a girl watched Class F from within the school building.

"H-Hey, look at them go! They're amazing!" a student remarked. "Wait. Aren't you related to her?"

Gripping the windowsill was Eleanor's cousin, Milena. "When did she get back her magic...?"

"Milena, didn't you say your cousin couldn't use fire magic anymore?" her friend asked excitedly. "She's so good at it!"

Watching Eleanor fight, Milena whispered, "She's so reckless..."

Fire magic had been as natural as breathing to Eleanor. Easy, simple, until the day she'd lost her ability to cast spells. Yet now here she was, fighting a monster. Protecting the academy with everything she had.

And here Milena was, just watching her from the sidelines as usual. Eleanor had always been that way. She'd always *had* to be that way. Finally, she was back—the cousin Milena had admired so much.

"Go!" Milena shouted at the top of her lungs, leaning out the window. "Go, Eleanor! You can do this!"

As if on cue, many others joined her, and cheers erupted from all over the school.

“Go, go!”

“Don’t you lose!”

“You guys are amazing!”

The cheers reached the ears of Class F’s students as they faced off against the monstrous Hanks.

“Seriously?” Ryan asked.

“N-Nobody’s ever cheered me on before,” Ilya stammered.

“We can’t let our guard down yet!” Eleanor warned.

“Well, this is only natural,” Charlotte said. “*I am* the leader of this class.”

“You know *I’m* the homeroom teacher, right?” Zenos grumbled, readying himself.

With the Royal Guard soldiers back in action thanks to Ilya’s magic, the group was slowly pushing Hanks back. His tentacles were regenerating more slowly, and his bulging muscles were growing smaller and weaker. He began to form words again, though only in fragments.

“I... I’m... Graaah!”

Zenos, holding his enlarged scalpel, turned toward Hanks. “You said something about a perfect academy like this having no place for defects, didn’t you?”

“Sh-Shut...up!”

“But look at them. It’s the so-called ‘defects’ who are standing up to protect the academy right now.”

“Defects...must...be...destroyed!” Hanks growled, sending his tentacles flying toward the group in one final, desperate attack.

“I may not know much, but I don’t think education is about making perfect people,” Zenos said as he slowly closed the distance between himself and Hanks.

The oncoming rain of tentacles was gradually burned away by Eleanor, cut down by Ryan, and repelled by the Royal Guard.

“I’ve never lived a proper life, so I don’t know much about what that’s like. All I’m good at is healing magic.” Wielding his scalpel, Zenos lowered his stance and dashed forward. “I’m just winging it when it comes to protection and enhancement spells. But even with all those imperfections, I’m still having a good time!”

“Stay...away! Stay away!” Hanks lashed out with another flurry of misshapen appendages, but they were growing feeble. Zenos swung his scalpel and cut through them with ease.

“Hanks. I think education is really about helping people live full lives, even if they’re not perfect.”

“You... You... What are you?!” Hanks howled.

Standing before the monster, Zenos replied, “I’m a *teacher*. For now, anyway.”

With a flash of his white blade, Zenos slashed horizontally at Hanks. The monstrous man let out a groan of agony and dropped to his knees before collapsing backward with a heavy thud, lying motionless on the grass. The tumor cells’ regeneration ability still remained to a minor degree, but it would take a while for the deep cut to heal.

Zenos looked down at Hanks, who lay on the ground, panting raggedly.

“I didn’t hit any vital spots. You’ll use up the last of your regeneration to heal from that wound. Until then, lie there and think about what you’ve done. The Royal Guard will handle the rest.”

Dazed, Hanks stared up at the school building. “Why...didn’t you...kill me? I...”

“Why? Well...” Zenos glanced over his shoulders at the students, who were high-fiving one another in celebration. “I can’t do that in front of them, can I?”

The entire battle had been visible from the headmaster’s office on the top floor of the academy.

“Wow! That was incredible! That man really did it!” said the vice principal, Bilsen, raising both hands in applause. He quickly regained his composure, however, and cleared his throat. “F-Forgive me. I got carried away.”

“I do not mind. The crisis at the academy *has* been averted, after all,” replied the headmaster, Albert Baycladd, who stood by the window with a placid smile. “He did quite well.”

“Y-Yes, he did. As detestable as I find him, I might have to admit that he truly is something. No matter how many menial tasks I gave him, he never faltered. The quality of his work was so impressive that it put professionals to shame. I’ve never seen anyone so capa—”

“Oh, you misunderstand, Bilsen.” The headmaster shook his head slowly, still wearing a charming smile. “Hanks is the one who did well.”

“Huh...?”

“Well, his methods were a bit extreme, but the result is passing, I would say.”

As Bilsen blinked in confusion, Albert turned his back to him and tapped the windowpane with a finger.

“With this, all of Class F will be expelled.”

Chapter 7: The Girl from the Great Noble House

“They’ll all be expelled...?” Zenos echoed.

He and his students had been summoned to the headmaster’s office the day after the monster incident. They’d expected to be appreciated for their actions, but instead, the first thing out of the headmaster’s mouth had been those words.

“I’m not sure I understand,” he said, tilting his head in confusion.

“Well, this was a very difficult situation,” the headmaster remarked cheerfully. “I’m relieved none of the students under our care died. For that, you have my thanks, Xeno.”

“Then why—”

“W-Wait a second!” Ryan interjected, lunging forward and slamming both hands on the headmaster’s desk. “We saved the academy! Why are you kicking us out?!”

“You truly did an outstanding job,” the headmaster replied, maintaining his cheery demeanor. “I was considering giving you all commendations, even.”

“S-So what’s—”

“Unfortunately, however, you have all accrued fifty penalty points.”

“What...?” Ryan trailed off, at a loss for words.

The headmaster’s expression darkened. “You had already accumulated forty points for driving out four of your homeroom teachers. Surely you’re aware of that.”

“W-We’ve been told, but that was all Hanks’s doing—”

“Well, Hanks’s whereabouts are unknown.”

“What...?” Ryan repeated, stiffening.

A soft sigh escaped the headmaster’s lips. “Moreover, we have eyewitness

reports of you physically harming Hanks, which means an additional ten penalty points will be applied for driving out yet another teacher. That makes fifty. It's a pity, truly. A few more days and the school year would've ended, the penalty points would've been reset, and Class F would've simply disbanded."

"Wait a second! You're saying we harmed him, but *he* was the monster that —"

"You're saying Hanks was the monster?" the headmaster asked with a perfectly bright smile that somehow made the situation all the more unnerving. "Ha ha ha! You expect me to believe such nonsense?"

Ilya nervously raised a hand and took a timid step forward. "B-But Mr. Headmaster, the Royal Guard took the monster from the premises. If you check with them, surely they'll confirm that it was Mr. Hanks—"

"Unfortunately, the monster went missing while in the Royal Guard's custody."

"Huh? H-How...?" Ilya mumbled, unsure of what to say.

Zenos glanced back at her before speaking up once more. "I see. You were the one pulling the strings."

The headmaster simply smiled in response.

It all made sense, looking back. After all, it had been the headmaster who'd created Class F in the first place. From the start, his objective must've been to get all of its students expelled. He'd used his influence as a member of one of the seven great noble houses to manipulate Hanks from the shadows, forcing each of the other homeroom teachers to leave. The strange drug Hanks had used would've been easy for such an upstanding nobleman to acquire as well.

As everyone's gazes fell on the headmaster, he straightened his back slightly.

"Indeed. We of House Baycladd exist to preserve the order of noble society. A child's expulsion tarnishes their family name, thus potentially costing them their noble status during the next rank review meeting. It's a convenient way to prune the overgrown branches of the aristocracy."

"Th-This was your plan all along?!" Eleanor snapped, lunging forward as well.

“It’s quite unfair to state I was ‘pulling the strings,’ however,” the headmaster continued, unflinching in the face of Class F’s rage. “I never gave a single order. Never issued any commands.”

“What do you mean?” Zenos asked, frowning.

The headmaster stretched casually. “All I did was mutter to myself, ‘Ah, how nice it would be if Class F could be expelled in accordance with the rules, so that their guardians couldn’t complain.’ Or, ‘How bothersome it would be for that monster to remain in the Royal Guard’s custody.’ They were but vague wishes, but for some reason, they all came true. For instance, perhaps someone acquired that strange drug from the Black Guild, and passed it on to someone else. Who knows, truly? Not even I am aware of what went on behind the scenes, yet somehow, it all simply came to fruition.” He paused, then stated, “This is the meaning of power.”

This short, simple sentence was enough to plunge the students of the lower nobility into despair. The silence that followed was oppressive.

One girl stepped forward, however, breaking the tension. Her chestnut hair swayed gently, and a sweet fragrance filled the room. “I object.”

The headmaster narrowed his eyes slightly. “Ah, Charlotte. I believe you, too, played a role in the monster incident. Well done.”

“Do not try to change the subject,” she retorted.

“I was simply trying to lighten the mood with small talk. Now then, let’s hear what you have to say.”

“You seem to be forgetting about me. I am currently a student of Class F, and if all of the class is being expelled, that would include myself. Surely you do not intend to expel me?”

For a moment, the headmaster gazed silently at the girl, who was both a fellow member of the seven great noble houses and his betrothed.

“There’s no need for concern,” he replied finally, still smiling cheerfully. “You’re officially enrolled in Class A. You can return to it anytime you choose. As long as you declare your return to your original class before the expulsion is finalized, you’ll be fine.”

“Did you not hear me? I said I’m a student of Class F. At least until the end of the school year.”

For the first time, the smile vanished from the headmaster’s eyes. The end of the school year would be when the penalty points got reset, and the temporary Class F was dissolved. In other words, waiting until then meant the mass expulsion of the students couldn’t happen.

“Hmph. Color me surprised to see you siding with the rabble. You do know that you’re just a guest in their class, I presume?”

“I thought as much, for a time. But having tea every day, bantering, facing challenges... These were all experiences I’ve had with them, not Class A. Thus, I do not see myself as a guest there anymore. I am their classmate.”

“Charlotte...” Zenos murmured, watching her from the side. The other Class F students held their breath as they watched the situation unfold.

Charlotte and the headmaster locked eyes, and finally, the headmaster sighed and shrugged. “Very well. I’ll back down for the time being. There would be no benefit to quarreling with a noble of another of the seven great houses like this.”

Just as the tension in the room began to relax, however, he spoke up again.

“But...I wonder if you’ll maintain that opinion knowing this.” Slowly, the headmaster stood up, and pointed at Zenos. “This man, whom you all admire as a teacher, has ties to the slums.”

Zenos’s eyes widened in surprise, and confused murmurs erupted from the students.

“Well, not that I can say exactly what these ties are,” the headmaster clarified, giving the students a somewhat smug look. “But when I hired Xeno, I did some digging into his background, and found surprisingly little. It was quite odd. Eventually, I managed to uncover that during his time as a member of Goldran’s lab in the Royal Institute of Healing, he slipped out of a party to assist an injured demi-human. And many demi-humans are from the slums.”

“Oh, that,” Zenos replied. “So you knew about it and still hired me?”

“I figured the information might come in handy someday, and lo and behold, it has. You were quite careless, I’m afraid.”

Zenos scratched his head. “A life was at stake. I don’t think I was careless at all.”

“A *slum rat’s* life was at stake. How much can that be worth, truly?”

“It seems we have different values. Do you know how much a life weighs? If not, you should try holding one in your hands sometime. They’re pretty heavy.”

The headmaster only stood there in silence.

“No matter how many times I face the exact same situation, I’ll always make the same choice,” Zenos said, looking the headmaster in the eye. “To just do everything I can.”

“Who *are* you, really?”

Zenos looked at the students, then replied clearly, “Well, I was planning on telling all of you eventually, but... I don’t just ‘have ties’ to the slums. I come from the slums myself. Xeno is just a pseudonym. My real name is Zenos.”

“Huh?!” exclaimed some of the students, nearly shouting in surprise. Charlotte, meanwhile, was shocked speechless.

In the Kingdom of Herzeth, the poor were an invisible class, abandoned, out of sight and mind for the ruling nobility. Yet here one of them was, standing at the forefront of their classroom.

“Oh my. Should you truly be admitting this so openly?” the headmaster asked, still exuding an air of composure.

“I wasn’t planning on saying anything I didn’t need to,” Zenos explained coolly. “But after teaching for a while, I changed my mind. It wouldn’t be very good to keep hiding things from them.”

Some of the students were on the verge of panic, but Ryan seemed unbothered.

“Uh, honestly, though, isn’t this kind of old news...?” he began in a laid-back tone. “I mean, he’s mentioned before he wasn’t raised right, and he does all sorts of weird shit. It was obvious he wasn’t an ordinary guy, so...why are we

shocked, exactly?”

Ilya raised her hand. “I-I agree. I always thought Mr. Xeno wasn’t ordinary. I feel a little relieved, actually, now that the mystery is solved...”

Eleanor, now calm, chimed in as well. “It’s true, he never did say he was a citizen. And besides, compared to the shock of Hanks becoming a monster, our homeroom teacher being a poor man seems irrelevant.”

“You guys...” Zenos murmured.

Charlotte, however, remained still and lost in thought, wearing a troubled expression. “You...deceived me?”

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention.” He’d told her in front of the food storage that he’d eventually explain the truth, but he hadn’t expected for it to happen right this moment.

“Enough. I’m leaving,” she said after a brief pause, then walked out of the headmaster’s office without turning back. The door closed with a stiff, inorganic sound.

Ryan glared at the head of the academy. “You got what you wanted, Headmaster. Are you happy?”

“I *would* advise you to mind your manners, but I will let it slide this time. Understand I bear neither malice nor hostility toward you. My priority is to maintain the order and balance of noble society.” His expression turned cheerful again. “Now, there are two days before the end-of-term ceremony. Once Charlotte declares her return to Class A, as she should, you will all be expelled. In the meantime, Xeno, you may as well continue until the end of your term. Let us watch what becomes of your class together.”

The aristocracy of the capital of Herzeth resided in an area known as the nobles’ district. Even within this area there was a hierarchy, with the estates of the highest-ranking families—the seven great noble houses—surrounding the royal palace, where the nation’s supreme ruler lived.

Within this illustrious space was the estate of Lord Fennel. In one of the

manor's rooms was a girl, sitting on a sofa with her knees drawn to her chest, her expression sorrowful. She gazed around the cluttered room, where her expensive clothes lay discarded haphazardly. In an attempt to soothe her stormy emotions, she'd taken her garments out of her closet, but couldn't bring herself to wear any of them, leaving them scattered across the floor.

Her mind and heart were just as messy, and she couldn't focus on anything.

At first, she'd only been mildly curious about that man. As she might when asking for a new dress, she'd asked her father to pull strings and get the academy to hire a healer. Before she'd known it, however, she'd found herself spending time at the man's dormitory room, going to a nighttime entertainment district, getting locked in a freezing storage room, facing off against a monster... Unexpected events had just kept happening, one after another.

And then she'd been hit with an absolutely unfathomable revelation.

"Charlotte?"

"Ah!" Charlotte jumped up reflexively, but upon seeing who the visitor was, she let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, papa. It's just you."

"What startled you? Did you mistake me for someone else?"

"N-Not really, no." Charlotte sat down once more.

Her father, Lord Fennel, glanced around the room with a puzzled expression. "Are you having a look at all of your dresses? Shall I call in a maid to clean up for you?"

"It's fine. I feel more at ease with a bit of clutter."

"What do you mean? Has that monster incident left you frazzled?"

The academy had, apparently, contacted the students' guardians about the monster incident, explaining that a creature had somehow infiltrated the campus and had been successfully dealt with by the Royal Guard. Bilsen, the vice principal, had seemingly been blamed for the lapse in security and was handling matters. In the end, however, it was likely the headmaster would sweep the incident under the rug.

While there had been no mention of Class F's participation in dealing with the crisis, she had no intention of bringing it up to her father, as that would've only made him worry more.

"No, I'm fine," she said, shaking her head and forcing a smile. "I didn't see it happen, either way."

"I see. That's good, then." Her father, looking genuinely relieved, rang a bell.

After a short while, a servant entered the room carrying a teapot. As the tea was poured, an incredibly pleasant aroma filled the air.

"These are the finest tea leaves money can buy, imported from the lands to the east. I thought we might partake in some," her father said. He took a sip of his tea, gave a satisfied nod, and began to make small talk. "How's your healing magic teacher, by the way?"

"Huh?"

"The one you asked me for, who was brought in to replace an absent homeroom teacher."

"Oh. Yes. Right."

"You may have everything, but more luxurious isn't always better."

"When you offer something to someone, you should consider whether they'll actually appreciate it."

"Everyone contributes the way they can. So do what you're able."

She didn't want to think about her teacher, but his words kept echoing in her mind. And now that she thought about it, he was also the first person to ever truly scold her.

"What's the matter, Charlotte?" Lord Fennel asked. "Your brows are furrowing."

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Come now, drink some tea. It works wonders when you're unwell, and these leaves have a relaxing effect."

"Ah, of course." Charlotte took the teacup from the table and gracefully

brought it to her lips. “It’s delicious...”

The flavor of the tea was pure and refined, embodying elegance in every sip. Luxury was best, after all. Everyone knew that. Higher quality meant higher value, and the price of an item reflected its worth. Just as social class reflected a person’s worth.

...Right?

Charlotte gazed silently at her reflection on the surface of the tea, remaining still, cup in hand.

Her father leaned in with concern. “Charlotte, are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” She paused. “Papa, did you know?” She raised her head, closed her eyes for a moment, and continued, “There are delicious varieties of tea out there that aren’t of the highest quality.”

The morning of the end-of-term ceremony had arrived. It was now the final day of the school year at Ledelucia Academy. In Class F’s classroom were the homeroom teacher, Zenos, and all of his students but one. Charlotte’s seat remained empty.

Headmaster Albert Baycladd stood by the lectern. He glanced at the wall clock as he said, “Well, it’s about time for the ceremony to begin...”

The sound of a door creaking open broke the heavy silence of the room. A pale-skinned girl with chestnut curls strode inside, ignoring the stares from those around her. She made her way to her seat, each of her steps purposeful and measured.

“Good morning, Charlotte,” the headmaster greeted. “We’ve been waiting for you.” He smiled placidly at her. “Now then, would you care to announce your return to Class A?”

Wordlessly, Charlotte looked around the room, then glared at her teacher. “Indeed, I am originally from Class A. On top of that, I am the daughter of the head of one of the seven great noble houses—the highest noble families in the nation.”

“That is exactly right.”

“I came to this class so that the students here could breathe the same air as an upper-class noble like me, and learn by observation what it means to truly be excellent.”

The headmaster nodded with a faint smile.

After looking one more time at the students and their homeroom teacher, Charlotte gave a soft smile of her own. “But what I learned instead was that I have no skills.”

Silently, the headmaster narrowed his eyes.

Charlotte shrugged. “I cannot use healing magic, I cannot wield a sword, and I cannot use fire magic. All I can do is sit back and act important.”

“Which is more than enough for you,” the headmaster pointed out, as though gently trying to instruct her. “Each individual has their own role to play.”

“That’s correct. Therefore, I will do what I am able.” Charlotte stood and declared loudly, “I told you. I am a student of Class F. I will remain here until this class is dissolved.”

Silence. Tension. Confusion. And then, as if the taut air had snapped, the others erupted into cheers.

“Lady Charlotte...!” Ilya exclaimed, holding back tears.

“Hell yeah! You hear that, jackass?!” Ryan shouted, pumping his fist in triumph.

“Mind your manners, Ryan,” Eleanor chided. “Do you *want* to get more penalty points?” Still, she couldn’t hide her own smile.

The students’ cries of triumph filled the room, marking the end of the school year at Ledelucia Academy.

“Ah... I see.” Albert brought his fingertips to his chin and paused for a moment, as if trying to figure out which expression and words would be appropriate for the situation.

Even as the headmaster, he couldn’t simply expel a member of one of the

seven great noble houses. He *could* use his authority to force the others out, but bending the traditional rules of such a prestigious institution too far could eventually compromise House Baycladd's position as noble rulers. Thus, with Charlotte's declaration that she would remain in Class F, he had no choice but to abandon his plan to expel them all.

With their penalty points reset, Class F was officially dissolved.

In the bustling hallway, filled with students heading toward the ceremony, Albert Baycladd and Charlotte stood facing one another.

"I see... So there are times when things *don't* go to plan," he remarked.

"That's something I experienced firsthand plenty of times after joining Class F. Maybe this will be a good learning opportunity for you."

"A learning opportunity, you say..."

Their engagement had been decided by their parents on a whim at some banquet. It was nothing but an arrangement of convenience. Charlotte didn't consider it formal, but she couldn't discern what the Baycladd heir thought. His expression remained unreadable. Though she'd known him since childhood, his true feelings had always been hidden behind a charming smile.

Each of the seven great noble houses was known by certain characteristics that had earned them distinct reputations. House Fennel was known for being moderate, and House Baycladd was known for being cunning.

"You've changed, Charlotte," Albert said, his expression serene.

"People change a little sometimes. That's what education is for, no?"

The headmaster's eyes widened slightly. "Pfft... Ha ha..."

Charlotte passed by him as he chuckled softly and continued down the hallway, not looking back. The distance between them grew as she strode purposefully down the hall, heading toward her homeroom teacher.

Zenos was standing by a window at the far end, gazing out at the lawn absentmindedly. "Oh, Charl—"

She slapped a letter into his hand before he could finish.

“What’s this?” he asked.

Without waiting for a reply, Charlotte turned on her heel and briskly made her way to the closing ceremony.

Meet me at the opera house after school, the letter had said.

Thus, after the ceremony, Zenos made his way to the opera house located on the academy grounds. As he walked through the campus, letter still in hand, he reflected on his time at the aristocratic academy. It was his last day as a teacher, and yet he felt as though he’d only barely begun to scratch the surface when it came to education—if that. He’d expected to be fired immediately upon revealing his status as a poor man, but not only had there been no word from the vice principal, Class F’s students hadn’t been treating him all that differently.

Either way, this strange experience of living among noble students had only happened because of Charlotte’s surgery. The girl from one of the seven great noble houses was now atop the stage in the silent opera house, standing tall with her arms crossed. Her piercing gaze, filled with anger, bore into Zenos.

“Why’d you call me here?” he asked.

“Before you ask me that, don’t you think you should be saying something to me?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Oh. Your apology comes so easily this time,” she retorted sharply. “You didn’t apologize when you patronizingly lectured me before.”

“I wasn’t trying to patronize you back then. This time, though, I really did do something wrong.”

Charlotte snorted, arms still crossed. “An apology cannot fix this.”

“Then what do you want me to do?”

“One thing, just for me.”

“If I can, sure.”

Charlotte unfolded her arms as Zenos approached the stage. "Dance."

"Huh?" Zenos stopped, caught off guard. "You want me...to dance?"

"You said you would, no? Just come up here already."

Surprised as he was, Zenos was in no position to refuse, and climbed onto the stage.

"Now take my hand," she demanded, brusquely extending her left palm.

"Uh, right." Zenos took her hand with his right.

Charlotte began to slowly take steps, leading the dance. Zenos had no idea what he was supposed to do, so he tried to at least move his feet without tripping.

"You're terrible at this," she remarked.

"I-I mean, yeah?" he replied. "I've never danced before."

They danced quietly for a while before she spoke up again. "I've been thinking..."

"Huh?"

"You lectured me before, remember? You told me to consider whether the person I'm doing something for actually wants it."

"You're still hung up about that?"

"Of course I am." Charlotte's deep green gaze bore angrily into Zenos, now only inches away. She pouted for a moment, then continued softly, lowering her gaze, "I had no interest in Class F at first, but that's changed. I couldn't let those kids be expelled. And so, I found myself thinking about what I could do for them that would make them happy."

Zenos smiled gently at her. "I see. Thank you."

"Why are *you* thanking me?"

"Well, I'm still your homeroom teacher until the end of today, technically."

Charlotte pursed her lips and looked up at him from beneath her lashes. "But...no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to figure you out. I'd never even

seen a poor person before, never talked to one, and had only ever read about them in textbooks before meeting you. So...who exactly are you?"

"I work mainly as a healer, but things happened, and I wanted to build a school for the children of the slums. That's why I wanted to learn about education."

"Are there no schools in the slums?"

"There aren't. No decent jobs with proper salaries either."

"Is that true?"

"It is, very much so. We're not even recognized as official residents of the country."

"So that's why you claimed to be foreign. Which means...that wasn't a lie, not really." Charlotte stared into the distance, lost in thought. "I can't truly comprehend the gravity of what you're saying."

"Right."

"But there's one thing I always circle back to, which is the fact that a poor man is not fitting company for me."

"That's for sure," Zenos admitted with a wry smile.

Silence fell between the pair. From their joined hands, they could feel each other's warmth. The setting sun streamed in through the high windows, casting a soft spotlight upon them.

"I was taught that the poor aren't even people. But your hand is so...warm."

"Of course it is. Even the poor are alive."

"Your hand was cold last time."

"We were freezing."

"Still, you're a horrendous dancer."

"Sorry about that."

Charlotte slowly lowered her gaze and muttered, "Why did you have to be poor?"

“Sorry.”

“If only you weren’t...”

“If I weren’t?”

“...Oh, you idiot.” She lifted her gaze slightly, and tears glistened on her pale cheeks.

“Charlotte, you’re—”

“What? I’m not crying. I do not show weakness in front of people, nor do I shed tears. To be a noble of the highest caliber means always maintaining dignity.”

The tears flowing from her eyes continued to slide down her soft cheeks. She didn’t wipe them away—wiping them would mean acknowledging them at all.

Charlotte raised her head. Her voice was tight, but she still spoke clearly. “I’m not...crying.”

“No, you’re not,” Zenos agreed with a gentle nod, lifting his gaze slightly.

In the empty opera house, the young lady of the seven great noble houses and the shadow healer from the slums became actors. Their steps slowly traced across the stage in a dance that, by all rights, should’ve been impossible in their country.



Epilogue I

“Oh, Lily, I’ll miss you so much!” lamented Ilya.

“Me too, Ms. Ilya!” lamented Lily.

The day after the closing ceremony, Ilya and Lily were hugging tightly in front of the dorms. Now that the school year was over, Zenos’s term was done, and the students from Class F had come to see him off.

After the long embrace with Lily, Ilya bowed deeply to Zenos. “Thank you, Mr. Zenos. It’s because of you that I can follow my dreams.”

“You helped us with our studies too, you know,” Zenos replied. “I live in the shadows, but if you ever become a healer, maybe we’ll meet again somewhere.”

“I hope so!” Ilya exclaimed, beaming and nodding enthusiastically.

She’d once been unusually humble for a noble, but no trace remained of her previous timidity in her cheerful, carefree smile. And although Zenos hadn’t achieved his initial goal of learning everything there was to know about the foundations of education, it was only thanks to Ilya’s private lessons that he’d learned anything at all.

Ryan was the next student to step forward, giving a small, somewhat bashful nod. “You helped me out a lot.”

“You know, I have to admit that I’m not sure I did all that great as a teacher, but at least I know for sure that I did, indeed, help you out a lot.”

“You don’t have to rub it in!”

Eleanor stepped forward next to Ryan. “Mr. Zenos, um... I’m really thankful. I’ll do my best moving forward...”

“I know you can do it.”

Now wearing her short-sleeved summer uniform, Eleanor nodded sharply under the bright blue sky.

Zenos exchanged a few words with the remaining students, but one of them was notably absent: Charlotte.

“Um, Lady Charlotte asked me to deliver a message,” Ilya said apologetically.

“Oh?”

“She said, ‘I don’t want to get a tan, so I won’t be coming. Besides, an upper-class noble such as myself should not have to endure the heat just to see off a plebeian.’ Um, that’s everything.”

“Sounds like her, all right.”

“But she did send a parting gift.”

Beside the school gate was a heavily decorated cart, loaded with a large wooden crate. Zenos pushed open the lid and the scent of brand-new paper wafted out; dozens of books were stacked high inside.

“Textbooks...” Lily murmured, eyes wide.

Atop the textbooks was a single piece of paper. Written in Charlotte’s penmanship was a brief message: *This is charity. You should be grateful.*

Ryan glanced at the contents of the crate, scratching his head. “The hell? It’s just textbooks. And why so many? C’mon, she’s part of one of the seven great noble houses, and *this* is the most she can do? She couldn’t, like, do something more thoughtful?”

Zenos shook his head, a small smile forming on his lips. “No, this is good. Ilya, please thank Charlotte for me. Tell her it’s the best gift she could’ve sent me.”

“Y-Yes, of course!”

Charlotte had put actual thought into it. She’d considered what would’ve made the recipient the happiest.

Zenos waved goodbye to the students and left Ledelucia Academy, pushing the cart Charlotte had sent. The sun felt hot against his skin, but a cool breeze brushed his cheeks. As the summer wind blew, the vivid memories of his time spent at the white-walled academy, short but intense, came flooding back.

“Ahhh... Ptooh!” came an unrefined voice from Lily’s staff, completely at odds with the elegance of the school grounds.

“Yikes!” Zenos yelped. “Carmilla! Why are you spitting like an old man?!”

“Oh, this was simply too dazzling and coming-of-age-y for me. I figured I would add a touch of sulking to the scene. It suits us better.”

“What kind of reasoning is that?!”

“You do not belong in that bright, shining world. You are a dweller of the shadows, just like me.”

“Well, that’s true...”

“Carmilla,” Lily called out, “you’re just sad because Zenos was thinking about other people.”

“D-Do not spout nonsense, Lily!”

Zenos scratched his head as he listened to their banter. “This was my first and last time experiencing something like this, anyway,” he said. “They know who I am now. But it was a valuable experience.”

“I had so much fun talking with all the noble ladies! And those royal sweets were so good!” Lily gushed, looking blissfully up at the sky.

“Hmph! I, for one, am not satisfied. I only got to carry out six of the seven mysteries.”

“You’re still talking about that? I didn’t even know you’d pulled off six of them! What did you even do, you floaty snake?”

“Ah, well. It matters not.”

From within the staff, Carmilla reflected upon Zenos’s path thus far.

The shadow healer from the ruined city had single-handedly ended the long-standing conflicts of the slums. He’d made connections with the vice commander of the Royal Guard and an elite healer from the Royal Institute. He’d even been to a meeting of executives from the Black Guild, a notorious den of evil. Then he’d become friendly with the children of nobles, including a young lady of one of the seven great noble houses.

Few had ever bridged the highest and lowest points of this country so thoroughly. Perhaps Zenos's very existence was the greatest mystery of all.

She chuckled. "Ah, events even more fun than the seven mysteries await us. Our coming-of-age tale is just beginning!"

"As usual, you're just having a blast," Zenos muttered. Also, Carmilla was a wraith. What did she *mean*, her "coming-of-age" tale?

"Teacher! I want to come of age too!" Lily exclaimed.

"Wait, who are you talking to?" Zenos asked. Lily had really gotten into the student role, it seemed.

With a sigh, he shrugged, squinting into the summer sunlight as he pushed the cart even harder.

Epilogue II

Albert Baycladd watched from the window of his office as Zenos and Lily disappeared into the distance. His eyes were clear, and his posture exuded elegance and charm. Even just standing there, he looked like the very picture of refinement.

Yet his handsome features betrayed no emotion.

“That man’s left, huh...?” muttered Vice Principal Bilsen, standing behind Albert.

“You sound sad.”

“N-Nonsense! Well, ah, perhaps it’s a bit disappointing that some tasks around the academy will be delayed. After all, his ability to handle chores far surpassed even that of our contractors—”

“So you *are* sad.”

“I-I am not!” Bilsen protested, turning bright red.

The headmaster cast a sidelong glance at Bilsen, then murmured, “What a strange man he is...”

Zenos had won over the students that had once rebelled against him, changed the outlook of a noble lady from one of the seven great noble houses, and even earned the favor of the prejudiced vice principal. Somehow, without them realizing it, those who’d once opposed him had become his allies.

“Headmaster, who *was* that man?”

“I do not know,” Albert responded, his eyes still fixed on the window.

Bilsen didn’t know of Zenos’s true identity, since the investigation into the healer’s background had been conducted through channels separate from the academy. Even then, the only testimony they’d gotten had been that Zenos had responded to a poor person’s request for life-saving treatment while at Goldran’s estate, but that didn’t conclusively prove his poor origins.

For now, Albert had no intention of revealing the man's true background, not even to the Royal Institute of Healing, where Zenos had once worked. Presumably, Lord Fennel had no idea either, considering the prestigious nobleman had personally recommended the healer. The Class F students admired Zenos and would probably keep quiet as well, so Zenos's secret was likely to remain safe.

He didn't have a particularly deep reason for keeping the man's identity hidden. All he wanted was to enjoy the feeling of knowing a little more about the mysterious character than everyone else.

"To think I would find someone I can't control. How fascinating..."

For the first time, a hint of true emotion flickered across his faintly curled lips.

Afterword

Hello! I'm Sakaku Hishikawa.

Thank you for picking up a copy of the fifth volume of *The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows*!

Pardon the sudden question, but... Are you all getting enough exercise?

I wasn't.

Writers are indoor creatures by nature (a stereotype, I know), so we tend to not bother with things like physical activity. I certainly didn't! But, nearly seven years after my debut, I've come to realize that being an author takes stamina. Doubly so if you have a day job. You come home from work exhausted, and even though you'd love to just dive straight into bed, you need to find the strength to work on your manuscript. Every so often you'll find that you have the will, but your body lacks the way.

That was why I decided to make a change! So, recently, I stopped using the elevator.

The problem is, my workplace is pretty high up in the building, so I have to climb over two hundred steps each time. And sometimes I have to go to a separate location on a lower floor, which means I end up having to go hard, running up and down multiple times a day. By the time I get to where I need to be, I'm so out of breath that I can't even hold a conversation. I try to be friendly, but I just end up sounding like a total creep, huffing and panting out my flared nostrils like, "Haaah... Fweh... Ah... Hah..."

But anyway, I want to be a powerful writer, so I'll persevere a little longer.

Now then, on to the acknowledgments.

Once again, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the editorial department of GA Novel, my editors especially, for their hard work in the publication of this book.

Thank you to Daburyu-sensei, the illustrator, who continues to come up with amazing character designs for *Brilliant Healer*, even as my instructions have slowly deteriorated to the point where I basically go, “Just do whatever!” Your designs remain incredible!

Thank you to Ten Junnoichi-sensei, the artist behind the manga adaptation! Every time I see the drafts, I’m reminded of how powerful visual storytelling can be. The world of *Brilliant Healer* is even better in the manga, so please check it out!

Yet another thank you to the readers of the web version of *Brilliant Healer*. Your feedback is a huge source of motivation for me. And, of course and as always, my deepest thanks to all the readers who have purchased this book!

Thanks to all of you, this series has surpassed 100,000 copies sold!

I hope to see you again soon!

5

Sakaku Hishikawa
Illustrator
Daburyu

The
Brilliant Healer's
New Life in the **Shadows**

Sakaku Hishikawa
Illustrator
Daburyu



The

Brilliant Healer's

New Life in the Shadows

5

“You may call me
Ms. Lynga!”

Lynga

“I’ll be your
teacher today.”

Zophia

“Bah ha ha! It is I,
the world-famous instructor!”

Loewe

“Why is everyone wearing glasses?”



Zenos and Lily gazed at the textbooks with admiration.

“Ooh.”

Ilya

“Wow...”

Charlotte

Zenos

Lily



**“WHAT THE...
WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!”**

With a single,
unbelievably fast punch,
the five high-ranking thugs
who had tried to stand
in their way went flying...

“Just a plain ol’ teacher
of healing magic.”



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