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Nia Tiston

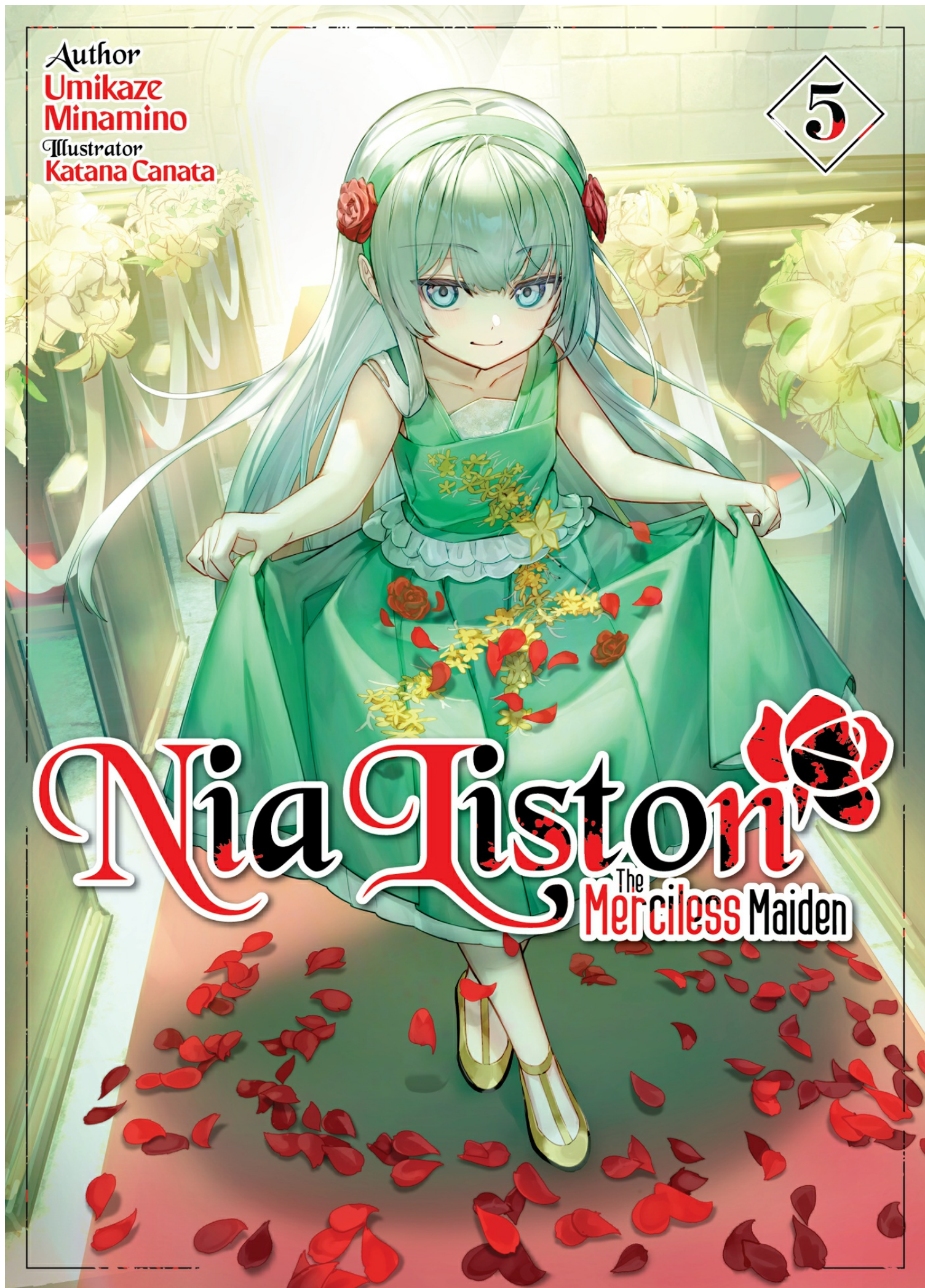
The Merciless Maiden

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“We’re in danger.

There is new young budding talent
that might surpass us and steal
our popularity.

How could you not view them
as threats?”



“It’s not exactly something
we can stop, though.”

An official campus broadcasting station is born!

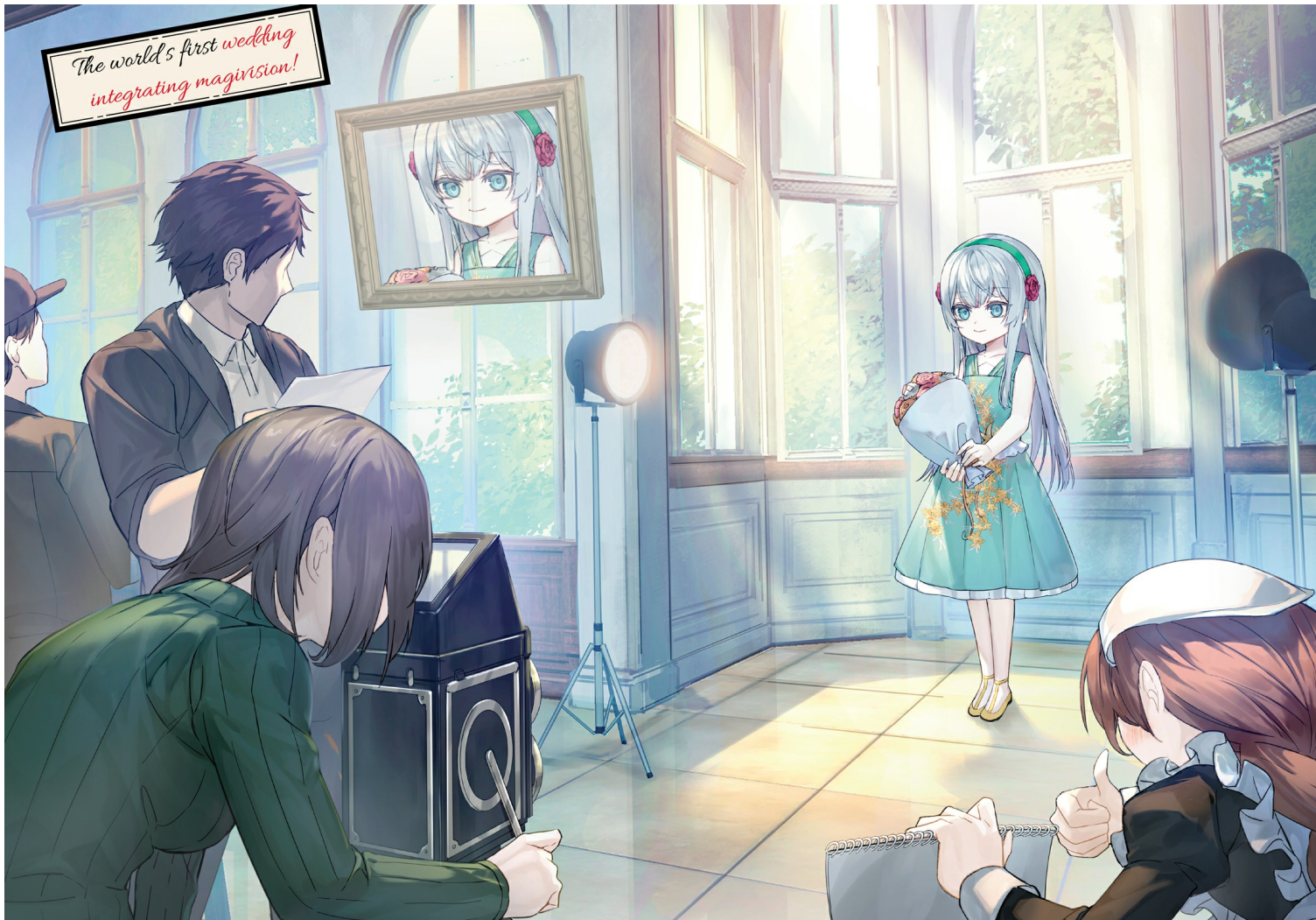




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Prologue

One man stood outside of the dojo. He was a muscular giant of a man whose stature made even fully grown adults look up to see his face.

He steadied his breathing, careful and controlled.

His body was but a vessel for the energy coursing through it, held steady so as not to disrupt its flow.

Slowly, he molded that energy.

At the beginning, it had taken him infinitely more time for this simple task. Though this required stillness, he would be sweating profusely, his body would become heavy with fatigue, and his knees would begin to shake with the effort.

The internal energy that he was training was called chi. Before his master came, it had been an entirely unknown concept to him, an entirely unknown skill. It had sounded like a figment of the imagination, one that would appear in the heroes' tales of old or the ancient scrolls of the martial way that detailed techniques and so-called hidden abilities that always sounded like a load of hogwash.

The more he had trained his external body in the Heavenstriker style, the more he had begun viewing those old tales as fiction. The more he learned of the reality of martial arts, the less he was able to believe the stories of the heroics carried out by those ancient practitioners.

However, learning of chi had completely overturned that perception. He began to realize that there was likely truth mixed into those tales after all.

"Hah!"

Gathering the chi he had tempered in his hand, he stepped forward and thrust out his palm.

It was a simple palm strike, and a practice one in the air at that. Yet it was heavy. Heavier than even a punch or a kick. It was a palm strike more lethal and

more powerful than any he'd performed before.

"That wasn't it..." Gandolph muttered, looking down at his hand trembling from the recoil of such a weighted Technique.

He closed his eyes. Behind his eyelids, he called to mind the image of the white-haired girl.

"Are you listening? Chi Fist: Roaring Thunder is a heavy palm strike that aims to destroy the surface of its target. Once you're comfortable with it, you can do it with your fist, your foot, your elbow, or even your knee. The basic form is as follows. What is most important..."

What was most important was the weight of the foot stepping forward—the power with which he stepped into the ground. Theoretically speaking, the harder the surface, the stronger the palm strike. Unfortunately, it made it impossible to practice indoors; one wrong move and he'd step right through the floor.

His master's palm strike had been incredible; both the ground and the air had trembled. He could tell even through a simple demonstration that its destructive power was beyond dangerous. He didn't even want to imagine what it would be like to be hit with such a strike. Even a thick metal plate would be easily dented with such power.

Gandolph's Roaring Thunder had nowhere near that level of power right now. If he dared try to use it against a metal plate, the only thing breaking would be his arm.

"I've got a long way to go... Oh, didn't notice the time."

Completion of the Technique was a far-off goal, so long as manipulating his chi was still a slow process for him. He needed to continue getting his body used to it before he'd have any hope of using it in a real battle. He couldn't even use it at will.

Setting those worries aside for now, he had someplace to be.

Lightly washing off his sweat, he changed out of his dogi and left the academy.

As always, the Shifty Shadow Rat was quietly operating from the darkness. It was that awkward time between night and evening, and the cheap alley bar was already filled with customers.

“Yo, Anzel, I hear you’re raking in the cash these days. Even your little place here’s bustling. How about lending me some of that fortune, huh?” The bartender’s old friend would sometimes come and take a seat at the counter as he did now, immediately falling into their familiar banter.

“Really not makin’ as much as you seem to think. The only reason I get so many customers is ‘cause the place is cheap. I’m here workin’ my ass off, but what I get in return is hardly worth it,” Anzel grumbled as he polished a glass. The booze they served was so cheap, they didn’t make that much profit for the number of customers they’d get.

What didn’t help was...

“Ah ha ha! You forgot to pay, sir!” Fressa, the barmaid of the establishment, gleefully cried out as she dashed off after a customer who had tried to sneak out unnoticed. Yet another customer trying to drink and dash. It had been a while since the last idiot who had attempted such an act, so Fressa was overjoyed at the chance to have fun again.

Don’t get on the barmaid’s bad side, and don’t think you can run either.

Those were the unspoken rules of the Shadow Rat; their patrons were well aware of them.

“Here we go again. Guy must have a death wish if he’s thinking he can pull something like that and get away with it.” This old friend was someone who both Anzel and Fressa knew—and naturally, being an old friend, he knew Anzel’s and Fressa’s real occupations.

“You’d think they could at least pay for this cheap swill,” Anzel muttered. “You hurry up and get outta here, as well.”

“Hey man, I just got here. You don’t gotta chase me out already.”

“If you’re gonna sit here and spend forever nursing a single glass, at least order something more expensive.”

“Nah, I’ve got work after this, so I can’t afford to get wasted.”

Anzel took that opportunity to lean forward on his elbows. “Anythin’ go down recently?” he quietly asked.

His old friend, Nastine, took a sip of his drink and then whispered back, “Nada. Altoire’s still keeping its peaceful reputation.”

“Well, hey, that’s something worth celebrating, ain’t it?”

“It’s a bit boring, to be honest. You’re right, though. Roughing up others isn’t really my specialty. If I can go around earning money in peace, I’m happy. What about you? Hear anything juicy recently?”

“Depends on your definition of juicy.” This *was* a bar and Anzel was its bartender, and that meant he often overheard all manner of unsubstantiated rumors. Though his general clientele didn’t lend themselves to credibility.

He’d make sure to take note of any rumors that sounded interesting, but it didn’t change that the vast majority were the most boring and pointless stories imaginable. Fressa was all for it, a lover of any kind of gossip, but Anzel was quite frankly getting sick of it.

“I think the only ones that caught my attention were about some drug trial that turned up some nasty side effects, a ghost sighting down in the sewers, and the discovery of some gigantic bat. None of them verified, by the way.”

His patrons would gossip about other things like something someone’s mistress had done or how hot some stage actress was or about how they took down some asshole they didn’t like or even blatantly discussing how they intended to take over his bar. That last one was dealt with by Fressa, but even if she hadn’t, Anzel would’ve done something about it himself. No way that was being left unchecked.

“That it? Man, that’s so boring.” Nastine sighed.

“I know, right? I don’t even care enough to look into them.”

As the two were idly chatting, someone entered the bar from the back.

“Anzel, it’s time to change shift.”

The newcomer was an elderly man, slim and well-dressed. His name was

Geese Baitz, another old friend of Anzel's. In his old age, he'd stepped back from the underworld and any rougher jobs.

Anzel had decided to hire him as a bartender for the Shadow Rat; as someone who'd lived life in the shadows and survived, Geese was still strong enough to handle a bar brawl and he had the presence of mind needed to handle any confrontations. Anzel was confident he could entrust his haven for thugs to his old friend.

"All right, thanks, Geese."

With another bartender here, Anzel could be on his way.

"Oh my, if it isn't Nastine."

"It's been a while, Geese," he politely greeted the older man.

"Is it safe for you to be drinking here?"

"I'm just here to spend a bit of coin at an old friend's business, nothing more than that. Have you gotten used to your work here?"

"Certainly more than before."

With that conversation fading out behind him, Anzel took his light bag of belongings and left his establishment.

After making it to the port, he boarded an airship that had been arranged by Cedony Trading and met up with Gandolph.

"Shall we get started, Anzel?"

"Sure."

Exchanging few words, the two faced each other in a fairly large room on the ship that they had asked to use. Both had stripped down because they knew they were about to sweat profusely from exertion.

"Hmph!" Anzel was suddenly wielding a metal pipe, leaping right at Gandolph without even loosening his arms first.

"Ngh!" The bartender's movement was faster than Gandolph had expected and the strike was heavier than it looked. It took all his energy just to block it

safely, but he was at least managing to prevent Anzel's strikes from hitting their target.

This was a simple spar, but the moment chi was involved, even sparring could be dangerous. If either of them let their chi drop, that would be the end of the fight. Gandolph could try to defend all he wanted, but without his chi, his bones would still break. If Anzel were to be the one who dropped his chi, his attack would be deflected entirely and Gandolph would immediately move in to counterattack.

It looked dangerous because it *was* dangerous.

With both still struggling with their chi manipulation, though, the pair had mutually agreed that sparring was the fastest way for them to reach fighting form.

They were about to go hunting in the quest for one billion krams. They'd arrive at their destination at dawn the following day.

Train, get proper rest, and then hunt.

Thinking of nothing but getting stronger, the two forgot their surroundings and turned their focus to nothing but their sparring.

Chapter 1: The Promotion Exam and What Lay After

Not long after we returned to Altoire from the Empire of Flight, my third semester began.

Our winter expedition had been successful. Since we were able to fly back on the same high-speed liner we'd had the honor of getting to ride on the way there, we'd managed to make it back a little earlier than planned. Only by one or two days, but it was something.

Our total earnings from our trip was one hundred and eighty million krams. We'd received ten million krams in reward money for defeating the skysquid, and the bonus Cedony added for hunting all of their orders rounded the number up nicely.

My initial goal had been three hundred million, so we'd only gotten a little over half. I was disappointed, but this helped me see just how much we could realistically raise.

It seemed more than possible for us to reach our goal of one billion krams. Though our next long vacation was a little ways away, it would certainly be doable by then. I would rule spring vacation out because that was too short, but summer vacation for sure.

I had little doubt in my mind that my work schedule would be stuffed full like last year, though. Our beloathed Bendelio would absolutely squish recordings into every possible crevice of my free time, insisting over and over that I could surely fit in a little more. But I still wanted to negotiate with him to see if I could get ten days free at the end of the vacation regardless. That would surely be enough time for us to earn the rest.

There was still plenty of time before summer, so I would use that opportunity to sufficiently prepare.

We could put together another hunt itinerary like we had for winter. With at least ten days, we could go around hunting only the high-value monsters, and

even operate in other countries for a time. Another option was to consult with Cedony to have them arrange a travel plan that would guarantee we'd earn the remaining eight hundred million or so.

That was something I could discuss with Lynokis later.

My third semester was just as busy as the two previous semesters. I managed to see Reliared at least once every day since we were in the same class, but we were both so busy with our magivision work that we never found the time to sit down for a proper chat.

Hildetaura, who was in my brother's class, was especially busy, and I barely saw her at all over the course of the term—her long-awaited project, *Cooking Princess*, was going swimmingly.

We bumped into each other the other day and we'd managed to catch up a little while we were there. She'd been busy with recordings for it recently, and even on her days off, she would spend her time going to cooking lessons. You could feel her drive to make the show perfect.

Apparently, she was enjoying working with fish right now. Her favorite way to eat them was to grill them and then cover them with salt. She liked the simplicity of no dressing and nothing to prepare in advance.

"Here, let me tell you a secret, Nia. Tell no one." She whispered in my ear that they had plans to hold a large event for viewers in the summer. They would participate in some fishing village's festival and then Hildetaura would cook them meals made from local fresh seafood.

Long vacations always made you want to do something a little more grand. I wouldn't be recording anything extravagant like the princess, but I did want to go out on another big expedition.

Hildetaura invited me to her live recording, but as interested as I was, it was lower on my list of priorities.

My magivision schedule in the Liston territories always came first. No matter what was offered to me, that was the one thing I could not afford to take out. Even if I wanted to deck Bendelio in the face, I would never back out of any

recordings.

Next on the list was earning money. If we didn't earn about five hundred million krams this summer, we'd never reach our goal in time. I had to start taking this more seriously.

Whether or not I accepted Hildetaura's invitation would depend on if I had space after that. My magivision schedule could be a little more flexible, but the adventuring one was not. I still wasn't even sure of the free time that I would be allotted to hunt. More than ten days would be best, but given the past experience, I figured I was unlikely to even get that much. Trying to get those days for that holiday to the royal family's island last summer had been tough enough.

I gave her an open-ended, "I would love to if my schedule allows," and left it there.

I didn't run into her again after that short conversation.

And that led to the next topic.

"Hey, Nia, can you tell me more about your story?"

Strangely enough, the day I bumped into Hildetaura was the same day that Reliared asked me such a ridiculous question.

"What story?" I asked.

"Your story about recovering from your illness," she clarified. "I want to turn it into a paper pl— OWOWOWOW!"

I gripped her hand as hard as I possibly could and said very firmly with no room for misinterpretation, "If my story is getting dramatized, we're doing it in *my* territory."

That cheeky girl. She took every opportunity to find stories that she could leverage for magivision. I needed to make sure I kept my eye on her. No more allowance for her (not that I'd ever given her one).

There were a surprising number of tasks to do at the end of the year—life was tough even as a child. Before I knew it, it was the day of the promotion exam.

Once that was done, it would be spring vacation, and then I would advance on to my second year.

“Good luck, Young Mistress! Make sure you go to the bathroom before the test starts, stay calm, read every question twice, and understand the question first before you answer! If you have time leftover, use it to check your answers! Don’t fall asleep or start doodling on the back of the answer sheet just because you finished early!”

“Yes, yes.”

They were the same familiar warnings and tips that Lynokis had been drilling into my head over and over for the last few days. Having already memorized this song and dance, I gave my usual response and left the room.

The dorm was unnaturally quiet today, and there was a palpable tension in the air. Given it was a children’s dorm, though, there was still *some* sense of liveliness, even with our aristocratic roots.

It wasn’t the most pleasant atmosphere given we were in that familiar cool air that heralded the coming of spring. But it wasn’t surprising—today was the day of our promotion exam, after all. It was the day we would fight to prove that we’d learned everything we’d been taught over the course of the year and knew how to apply it.

Apparently, your score didn’t affect your progression to the next school year while you were in elementary school, but it still came with a penalty if you performed badly. If you didn’t score above a certain threshold, you had to take mandatory supplementary lessons the following school year. In other words, your class hours would increase for the *whole year*.

What a terrifying rule. I’d also heard that you’d be forbidden from going to any after-school martial arts classes or science clubs.

Well, as frightening as it may be, I wasn’t particularly worried—even if I didn’t have much faith in my brain. That monster known as *homework* might have been the bane of my existence, but thanks to its endless pursuit of me, I had actually managed to keep quite a lot of the information in my head.

I had learned to do calculations up to seven whole digits—though it was a

painstaking effort that required me to use both of my hands—and I'd even memorized quite a lot of the founding tale of Altoire that we'd covered in our history lessons. The Silver territories' paper play that detailed said tale had inspired a whole slew of other historical programs that had helped me learn a number of past events. Even Neal and Lynokis had given me a thumbs-up concerning my knowledge.

The pressure from Lynokis recently had been strong enough I couldn't fight it, so I'd made sure to thoroughly study everything; there was no need for me to be nervous. At least, there shouldn't have been. I...I think.

Huh...? Now that I'm conscious of how close it is, my stomach's starting to hurt... I didn't think I really needed the bathroom, but I decided to go just in case.

Once the promotion exam was over, spring vacation would start. Given how short it was, I'd be spending my whole time getting ready for the new school year. What was more, that blasted Bendelio had definitely prepared another schedule from hell, so I'd given up on the prospect of fitting in even a short expedition. Spring was a no-go on the adventuring front. As such, I would look forward to summer instead.

His Majesty had said that we should spend a year in advance advertising the tournament. It would be good to give him a progress report soon, just in case—let him know how much we'd raised and that the goal seemed feasible. The king was likely watching out for an ideal time to make his own move, so it would be good if we could at least be on the same page.

However much I attempted to run away from the difficult exam question in front of me by thinking of such unrelated matters, time was mercilessly marching on.

As it turned out, things did *not* go as expected.

As I would soon discover, plans could very easily be flipped on their heads the moment something of higher priority entered the picture. Those light promises I had exchanged with my new acquaintances would soon be fulfilled much

faster than I had ever anticipated.

We would once more be flying to Vanderouge over my spring vacation.

One day following the promotion exam and only a few days before the spring vacation, I returned to my dorm room with my head yet again heavy with fatigue and got to work writing some correspondences. While I was in the middle of folding over the first letter I had written, there was a knock at the door—and when Lynokis answered the door for me, the most surprising name came back.

“Young Mistress, Her Highness is here to see you.”

What incredible timing. This made things much easier for me.

“Let her in,” I instructed. The moment I did, the blonde girl entered my room.

“Good afternoon, Nia. My apologies for the sudden visit.”

“No need to worry. I needed to find you later anyway.”

I’d barely seen Hildetaura over the course of this third semester. Not only were we both busy, we were both in different classes. It was good that we were busy, though; it meant that things were going well for the both of us.

“You need something of me?”

“Yes. I wanted you to hand the letters I’m writing to the king.” As I said, it was incredible timing. If she hadn’t come to see me, I’d have gone to see her either tomorrow or the day after.

“To the king...? Is this about the billion krams?”

I hadn’t brought up this topic with Hildetaura since I explained it to her on our island vacation last summer. Back then, the king had explicitly told her to be our messenger.

“Had you been waiting for me to bring it up again?”

Lynokis pulled out the chair opposite me and Hildetaura elegantly sat herself down.

“Somewhat. I *was* getting a little curious. May I peruse the letter?”

There was nothing in the first letter that needed to be hidden from her, so I passed it over. Her eyes widened as she finished reading it. “What?! You have raised two hundred million krams already?”

“Indeed. I thought it would be good to update His Majesty.”

Given the kind of man the king was, I’d made sure the contents were as concise as possible. The first letter detailed the total amount we’d banked with Cedony. The second letter was asking for his opinion on our predictions for how much we could earn by the end of the summer vacation and our current pace of earning.

Basically, how much did he want us to earn and by when?

It wasn’t as if the plan wouldn’t move forward before we’d raised the billion krams. We could begin preparations with one hundred million alone, so if we could iron out deadlines for specific totals, we’d be able to adjust our pace and schedule. With specific quotas, we would be able to earn the money comfortably and efficiently, so I decided it would be useful to hear his opinion first. I made sure to also give him permission to use our money whenever he pleased, given it was for tournament purposes.

“How did you earn so much?”

“Have you heard of Leeno the adventurer? She’s famous around Altoire at the moment.”

“What? Well, yes, I have at least heard her name...”

“It’s her.” I pointed at Lynokis, who was in the middle of preparing expensive tea leaves that I rarely got to drink. “Leeno is in fact my personal attendant. I’ve been having her earn the money for me.”

“Is...that so?” That was all that left the shocked Hildetaura’s mouth. “Well... I assume there are many plans at play here, so I will refrain from further comments. Naturally, I will not tell a soul about this.”

I could tell there was a lot she wanted to say. No doubt she was wondering why Lynokis was working as both an attendant and an adventurer at the same time, and why she was still working as an attendant at all when she could clearly earn much more as an adventurer. She had declared she would say no

more as a sign that she would swallow those questions.

“Do keep it a secret.”

How had we earned so much money? I thought there was a chance that the king would also ask that question and so I decided to provide Hildetaura with an answer for now. I’d be a bit worried about telling Reliared, but Hildetaura was not just a member of high society, she was royalty.

Aristocratic society was all about trying to pull the others around you down to lift yourself up. Accidentally letting slip a secret could result in horrible upsets, or even a loss of your own position. Hildetaura should know that well.

She was the one person I trusted would not flaunt her newfound knowledge.

“Now why are you here? To drink tea?”

“Oh, right. I was so surprised by everything you told me it completely slipped my mind,” she said, folding the letter back over and placing it on the table.

“Coincidentally, I happen to have a letter from my brother addressed to you.” Hildetaura took out a plain white envelope from her jacket’s inner pocket.

From her brother, hmm? She was right, it really was quite the coincidence. She came all this way to deliver a letter *to* me and would now be returning to deliver a letter *from* me. At least it saved any extra trips.

“You say your brother, but which? I’ve only met Prince Hiero.” The second prince of Altoire, Hiero Altoire, was the one whose name I’d used to get myself into Vanderouge over the winter vacation, so I’d met him before. But I believed Hildetaura had many older brothers and sisters. No younger ones, if I recalled correctly.

Rumors said that there were also many illegitimate children that weren’t officially recognized. Given that king’s personality, I thought it was very possible to be true. Most likely, they were very calculated births too—all so he could gain more promising subjects. When you really thought about it, he was one hell of a crazy king...

“It is, in fact, from Brother Hiero.”

I wonder what it could be about.

“Give me a moment and I’ll finish writing this second letter.” It was better for me to start by completing the work in front of me first. I’d already consulted with Lynokis about what to write in it; all that was left was for me to put it to paper.

Once I was finished, I placed the letters inside an envelope. I decided I wouldn’t need a seal of any kind. I didn’t mind if Hildetaura saw the contents, so I gave it to her like that.

“I will ensure it gets to my father. Here is my brother’s letter.”

After I handed my letter to Hildetaura, she handed Hiero’s letter to me. This one wasn’t sealed either. I quickly took the paper out and read what he had to say.

“Oh my...” The contents of the letter gave me quite the surprise—which in and of itself surprised me.

“Is there something interesting written in it?” The envelope was unsealed, but it appeared Hildetaura hadn’t read it. The fact Hiero hadn’t secured it in any way must have meant he didn’t mind the possibility that his sister could’ve seen what he’d written, so telling her shouldn’t be a problem.

“He wants me to keep my spring vacation open to attend a wedding in Vanderouge.”

“A *wedding*?”

To be precise, what was written was, *“Zackford and Phyledia have invited me to their wedding ceremony, so please come as my plus-one. We’ll go over the details in-person in the coming days.”*



“Ah, I have heard talk that the Huskitans’ son and the young Cauculis lady of the Mech Kingdom intend to get married after graduating from the learning institute,” Hildetaura said. Of course a member of royalty would know the latest noble gossip. Not even being as busy a child as Hildetaura left her ignorant to the goings-on around her.

What was interesting here wasn’t that I was being invited to the wedding ceremony, but that Prince Hiero appeared insistent that I attend. This had to be related to the promotion of magivision. This letter was from the prince who was marketing magivision in a foreign country, and that meant it was possible that there’d been some progress on that front.

That was why I was so surprised. If he was calling me in, that meant he was requesting my assistance with something related to magivision. Thinking back now, those two princes had some very scheming looks on their faces when we’d parted in Vanderouge. Perhaps their plan had gone well, whatever it was.

“Tell him I understand. But also let him know that it’s quite difficult for me to make spontaneous plans, so I would appreciate it if he would tell me the dates as soon as possible.” I needed to know when I would be required to free up my spring vacation and for how long. My vacation schedule was probably already filled with nothing but recordings in the Liston territories. Bendelio would have stuffed it absolutely full. *I want to give that man the biggest piece of my mind possible. Let me rest! I’m going to have to somehow get him to adjust it all.*

I was busy enough keeping an eye on my students’ progress, doing recordings, making plans for future expeditions, doing homework, and doing my best to keep the suspicious Lynokis at bay. Asking me to fit in yet another thing into my schedule felt like asking the impossible.

But if it was for the sake of magivision, I had no choice but to cooperate. Promoting it around Altoire was important, but we’d gain bigger profits if we managed to sell it in foreign countries too. Not that those profits would go to me...

“All right, I will. Once brother provides me with a response, I will return to pass it on to you.”

After only a single cup of tea, Hildetaura returned to the castle.

“As thanks, we will provide you with twenty million krams,” Prince Hiero stated.

That was quite the notable sum.

“Perhaps I should not say this, but I would gladly help you even without a payment.”

“No, this is something we cannot afford to fail. I don’t want you viewing the job so casually that you don’t put in the effort because you are simply volunteering your support. That’s why I want to have a suitable reward for you.”

In other words, that was how seriously I had to take on this responsibility. That was how prepared I had to be.

“I realize it’s strange of me to ask you under these circumstances, but could I hear your response?”

He was right, it *was* a strange question to ask.

“Given I am already on the way to Vanderouge with you, my answer should already be clear. However, let me make it explicit: I agree to work with you and see this job through to the end.”

With the verbal affirmation provided, Altoire’s second prince gave a strong, satisfied nod.

It was currently the middle of my spring vacation. Though I had originally planned to meet with Prince Hiero at the end of the semester, our schedules never seemed to align, so we ended up unable to meet to make any plans.

In the end, the first opportunity for us to meet again was after my vacation period had already started. The meeting was arranged at the very last minute; we met up in the middle of Prince Hiero’s flight to Vanderouge.

Earlier that day, I had been fighting through a recording schedule from hell, but then Prince Hiero picked me up directly from my last recording location on an airship going straight to Vanderouge.

The spring schedule had been even worse than winter... Though it was my work to do, so it was no use complaining.

After finally meeting with Prince Hiero again, he explained to me why I needed to attend Zackford and Phyledia's wedding, and suddenly, the reason he'd required my presence specifically made perfect sense: his request was a recording of their wedding.

After being picked up from my recording location by the high-speed liner, I was brought to a meeting room inside the ship. I sat at the table opposite Prince Hiero, and that was when he handed me some documents and informed me about the nature of this work.

"I imagine we'll have a more detailed meeting later, but could I ask some questions about how negotiations for this went?" This was the first time I'd even heard what the plan was. It was so sudden; I had literally just finished recording moments ago.

This was a job worth twenty million krams. I wanted to make sure I had no holes in my understanding of it.

A responsibility weighing twenty million krams... Both physically and mentally, monster hunting would be much less stressful.

"Of course. Ask anything you'd like."

To be honest, I was so exhausted I wanted to fall asleep right there, but if I did, given we were on the high-speed liner, we'd probably land by the time I woke up, and by then it would be too late. We'd be busy the moment we reached our destination, so if we wanted to get in a brief initial meeting, it had to be now.

Seriously, though, I really wanted to sleep. My body begged for rest.

"This will be the first ever magivision recording in a foreign country, yes?"

There were programs that had recorded sceneries in foreign countries, but never anything that had both the culture and important members of society as its focus. In that respect, this would be the first recording that had managed to truly make its way inside another country.

“Yeah. That’s why I wanted to ask you specifically to take this on.”

He seemed to have understood what I was implying.

“You determined that neither Hilde nor Relia would be suited for the task, didn’t you?”

“Right again. Hilde’s status as royalty would only make the Vanderouge side walk on eggshells around her. Since this is the first ever foreign recording, I’d like to reduce the political pressures as much as possible.”

That would explain why he wanted to avoid any members of royalty other than himself as much as possible. Hildetaura was still a small child, but Hiero had come to the conclusion that he didn’t want to risk even that much political sway; he wanted to remove as much uncertainty as possible from a job this important.

“Why did you write off Relia?”

“Because I’d feel bad asking her. That girl is timid around even Altoire royalty. Imagine I then thrust her into a situation filled with Vanderouge nobles. She’d faint from the anxiety of it all. In that respect, you...” He stopped there, probably because he was about to say something rude. I was brash, insensitive, shameless, so I would be fine. It wasn’t untrue, so I didn’t feel offended, honestly.

Whether royalty or nobility, once you took off their clothes, they’re just regular people. What reason did I have to fear them? Beat them up and all of them would bleed. If my opponent was a human, I could always figure something out.

“It’s our first foreign recording, which if you look at it from their side, means they’re being faced with a whole new culture and technology. They’re going to naturally be guarded about it. But if the one leading it is a young child, that unease will likely lessen. ‘Why do we need to be scared about something a little girl can do?’ Plus, Zack and Phyle nominated you themselves. To Altoire and Vanderouge, you are the one most suited for this task.”

Truly, I had never imagined that that chance meeting back in winter would lead to a magivision offer in a foreign country worth twenty million krams.

“This is more out of my own curiosity, but how did you manage to receive permission for this in the first place?” I was interested in what tale he’d managed to spin to get this to happen. How had that prince duo’s persuasion—their plotting—come to fruition?

“First, we found out Phyle’s grandparents can’t leave Marvelia, so I suggested the recording to grant them an opportunity to see her wedding. Second, I pitched to them the idea of leaving an eternal record behind. Third, I emphasized that this would all be free, a wedding gift. Fourth, I sold them the idea that they could make the impossible possible and let their future children witness their parents’ stunning wedding when they too come of marriage age. Fifth, I mixed in a small lie that you wanted to congratulate them on their wedding and this was all you felt you could offer.” The prince glanced at me before continuing his monologue.

“Sixth, I mentioned that the first foreign recording was likely to garner attention even in Vanderouge, and would no doubt serve as a fantastic first step in the introduction of the technology to the country, thus making their early involvement beneficial. Seventh, I made sure to have a compromise ready that stated recording would only be allowed in designated locations, just in case there was any resistance. Eighth, I straight-up asked Phyle if she’d like to preserve her beauty in some way. Ninth, Christo got really mad that they still wouldn’t accept even though I was asking so sincerely. Tenth, I also got mad and pushed it as hard as possible.”

The prince took a deep breath, having reached the end of his spiel. “And so, Christo and I were able to convince Zack and Phyle, and then later the Huskitans and the Cauculises to go ahead with it.”

I blinked.

Just so you know, my brain can’t keep up with such long-winded speeches.

“To be honest, though, the one argument that really had the most impact was asking about preserving Phyle’s beauty. I just said it as an offhand comment and yet it turned out to be the most significant thing I brought up.”

I could see it happening. A woman’s obsession with her own beauty was powerful, after all.

“We’ve already had various meetings, but we do need to finalize some things once we arrive. I’d like for you to drill the plan into your head by then.”

I thought he might say that.

“That’s impossible for me at the moment.”

“Huh?”

“Lynokis. How many recordings have I done over this vacation period so far?”
I called back to my attendant standing behind me.

“Eleven, Young Mistress.” Though I had put her on the spot, her answer was immediate.

“I have recorded eleven episodes in about a week. That’s a week of going home purely to sleep that I only just escaped. If I don’t get any rest, my brain simply will not function. I’m already tired.”

Prince Hiero was silent as he flashed a smile at me.

“You’ll be fine. We humans can go without sleep for four nights in a row and still be surprisingly functional.”

Don’t be ridiculous. No way anyone would be okay after that.

“I’m on my second all-nighter in a row myself. My mind is conversely really quite alert.”

Was he quite sure? This workaholic was clearly overworking himself.

“I think you need sleep even more than I do, Prince Hiero.” His brain would turn to mush if he kept on working like that.

“Our upcoming work is invaluable. For the first time, we have a project that could be the stepping stone into other countries even beyond Vanderouge. I can’t waste time sleepi— Guh!”

Stop yapping already. The moment Prince Hiero looked down at his cup, I dashed out of my seat and knocked him out with a strike to the neck. Before his body could collapse onto the table, Lynokis swooped in and caught his head, moving away the cup before gently laying him down. *Good show, my dear student.* It was as if she’d known I was going to do it before I’d even moved.

What an utter fool this boy was. It was *because* this work was so important that he needed to sleep. If he had time to say such nonsense, he had time to rest.

I was tired too. I didn't think I could stay awake much longer.

"The recording of a personal wedding is an interesting plan, at least," Lynokis remarked.

"Indeed. It's innovative, for sure."

This would serve as a good test case. If we could do something about the price, I was sure it would catch on in Altoire as well. Magivision would become something even more integrated into our personal lives.

Those thoughts could come later, though.

"I'm going to take a little nap now. You're tired too, aren't you? Get some rest yourself while you still can."

"Yes, Young Mistress. Good night."

We needed to preserve our energy before the big mission.

This was one job we absolutely could not fail.

That night before we disembarked, we met with the production crew we would be working with.

"My apologies. It appears I fell asleep without realizing it," the prince said when we finally emerged.

By the time both the prince and I had woken up, we'd already arrived in Vanderouge—we'd been completely conked out, dead to the world. That was the reason we were now pressed for time.

"No, please don't apologize!"

The capital's production crew would be in charge of the recording for this wedding. Even the manager in charge of all the production crews, Mirko Tair, was here and she was rarely on-site these days. Just like the last time I'd seen her, she was a capable woman dressed in her usual black suit and glasses.

However, even someone as capable as Mirko couldn't remain unfazed by the prince's apologies. Not just her, but the other familiar faces of the crew were flustered too. Honestly, I definitely should have been more concerned myself. We were literally in a situation where a member of royalty was apologizing to those of lower classes.

It sounded like the plan was originally to have a meeting with me and the production crew on the airship ride to Vanderouge, but after I'd knocked Prince Hiero out last night, he ended up sleeping through the entire journey.

"Nothing to get so worked up about. I was fast asleep myself, so let's just move on." It was ninety percent my fault, so I decided to bail him out.

That other ten percent was his fault, though. The reason he didn't wake up even once was definitely because he'd been forgoing sleep in the first place. Who could possibly do a good job in such a state?

Regardless, we were wasting our time on this discussion. We'd already arrived—it wasn't the time or place to exchange pointless apologies and humble reassurances.

"You're right... We're slightly off schedule, but I'll make up for this with my work," Hiero said.

Yes, exactly. We don't have the time to spare.

Zackford Huskitan and Phyledia Cauculis's wedding would be in two days. Our schedule had unfortunately ended up so tight because both the prince and I had been busy with work in Altoire. We only had today and tomorrow to prepare for the big day. In fact, it was already the afternoon, so it was more like a day and a half.

Today would be used to have a detailed, focused meeting, and tomorrow would be used to make any preparations. We were in a foreign country, so there were all sorts of annoying permissions we had to apply for.

The schedule of the wedding itself had already been decided in advance, so we would adjust to that. We'd either carry out the recording focusing on the key moments or we'd record everything and edit it later.

The most stressful part of this whole affair would definitely be planning the

preproduction. Having the events of the wedding decided for us made that part much easier to work with.

“Heeeeeeeey!” Because the crew had caught up with us on the deck of the airship right as we were about to disembark, we’d gotten stuck listening to Hiero apologize for messing up and everyone else insisting it was okay. One of the people waiting for us at the port was getting impatient.

“I’ll go ahead, then.” As a way to cut off this pointless discussion, I descended the ramp first and met with the black-haired siblings waiting down below.

“Welcome, Miss Nia Liston. Guess I’m interacting with you as a collaborator this time.”

“It’s been a little while. Let’s have a race if we find the time.”

It was Christo Volt Vanderouge—fourth imperial prince of Vanderouge—and his younger sister Crowen. I’d met them during my expedition to the country the previous winter. After first meeting Christo and Prince Hiero, they invited me to a gathering at the house of the groom of the upcoming wedding, which was where I met Crowen.

We really were strapped for time, which was why the two had come to meet us directly at the port. Given their status, they had bodyguards accompanying them, but their guards were maintaining some distance so as not to get in the way. *Hmm... They don’t seem very strong.*

“We can deal with introductions later,” Christo quickly said as he watched Hiero, Mirko, and the rest of the production crew flow down the ramp in droves. “I’ll take you guys to your hotel first. We’ve already made arrangements to hold our meeting there. Follow me.”

Smart move. If we stopped to chat here, we’d only get in the way of the workers.

Without even having a moment to bathe in the nostalgia, Christo led us to three large skiffs. We split ourselves up across them and headed straight for the hotel.

“First, let me start by thanking you all for coming to my friends’ wedding.”

We were brought to the same luxury hotel I had stayed in over winter. After we had all gathered in the largest VIP room the hotel had, Christo started the discussion.

This room is even bigger than the one Lynokis and I stayed in... It was both bigger *and* fancier. I hadn't even realized there was a room a grade above ours. I didn't want to know how much it cost to stay here for the night.

"I am the fourth imperial prince of Vanderouge, Christo Volt Vanderouge. Since I'm so far down the line of succession, I don't have much power and I'm not set to become some big shot either. Acting all high-and-mighty isn't really my thing, so no need to be all formal with me."

Being casual with Prince Hiero was one thing; being casual with Christo at the same time was asking a lot. Our production crew was mostly made up of commoners. In fact, a number of them were already cowering away from him, sitting meekly at the table and turning their gazes down.

"I'm Christo's little sis. Name's Crowen Volt Vanderouge. I'm really just here to help out my brother. If you've got any small jobs that need doing, ask away."

It was all well and good for her to offer, but she was part of the imperial family too—no one would feel comfortable asking her to do anything trivial.

"Could you get the tea, then, please?"

Except for me, that is. The crew were looking at me like I'd gone insane, fear and awe clear in their expressions, but I didn't mind that either. Nor did I mind the ones looking at me like I was about to shatter the bounds of the class system.

I could have reminded them that I was the daughter of the fourth-class Liston family, but I ignored that impulse. I wanted to tell them that I was much closer in status to royalty than they seemed to think, but I ignored that impulse too. I would ignore every insignificant thing from here on out.

Crowen nodded and began preparing the drinks for everyone.

Perfect, that's exactly how we need them to be. We had no need for nobles who flaunted their status and yet did absolutely nothing productive. The only ones present who were knowledgeable about Vanderouge were Christo and

Crowen, so we needed everyone to be willing to say their brutal and honest opinions during the meeting. Well...maybe not quite that far, but the crew needed to at least be able to hold a discussion with them.

I had taken the opportunity to immediately show that the royals were in fact completely okay with being treated like normal people, so hopefully that would help ease the tension a little.

Watching his sister quietly complete her menial task out of the corner of his eye, Christo frowned at Prince Hiero. "Oh come on, you didn't even finish your own meeting first?"

"Sorry," Hiero apologized. "We had planned to do it on the way here, but I fell asleep."

"Ugh, see, Hiero? What did I tell you? You're overworking yourself, dude. You need to make sure you get decent rest."

I wholeheartedly agreed. Still, I wouldn't have guessed that even *Christo* had been scolding Prince Hiero over his sleep schedule. It wasn't bad to enjoy your work, but it didn't do anyone any good for him to work so much he damaged his health.

"Guess we just gotta deal with it. We can smash the meetings together. Feel free to interrupt me any time you have questions," Christo said, finally bringing our first planning session to order.

The first topic of discussion that we were supposed to go over on the journey was the conditions set in place by the Vanderouge side.

Since Prince Hiero had demonstrated magivision all across the country, there were already many nobles and royals who were familiar with the idea itself, but not many of them seemed to grasp what exactly it was. It was a technology entirely foreign to Vanderouge, so it only made sense that being presented with it so suddenly would leave them a little confused. There were many who had no idea how it all worked or couldn't understand the point of the programs.

To be fair to them, of course they couldn't understand—our programs were mostly for leisure. There was nothing to be found by overanalyzing them.

However, once it was thoroughly explained to the nobles, many recognized it as something to be wary of. They learned it was a type of technology that could take real events and preserve them as moving images. Even Zackford had mentioned the possibility of using it for warfare.

Recordings of a country made it possible for topography, cultural progression, and even weaponry or army tactics to be leaked. What was more, Vanderouge was known as the Empire of Flight; their airships were the most advanced in the world. Recording could be an excellent tool for stealing such technology.

That fear taking root in their hearts had all but stalled the sale of magivision in the country, but—thanks mostly to the considerable fortunes involved—a special exception had been made for this occasion. That was why I had been called here.

That said, even though the administration had approved of this exception, so long as the citizens of the country still harbored those doubts, there would be many restrictions placed on any recordings.

The conditions for the recording of the wedding ceremony were as follows:

Recording may only be done inside buildings or designated premises.

Permission must be received before any important figure was recorded.

Recording was only allowed at designated times pending the approval of a designated supervisor.

Any recordings were forbidden from leaving the country.

The supervisor had the authority to allow or deny recording at any time.

If we broke any of the rules, our recording would be denied, and whether or not we were perceived as following those rules was totally at the mercy of the supervisor.

“Who’s the supervisor?” Prince Hiero asked.

Christo grinned. “There’s two. The man known for being the sharp blockhead, commander in chief of the Ground Forces, Gawin Garde, and the youngest ever commander in chief of the Air Force, Kakana Lesiegin. Daddy dearest seems to be just a tad wary of the whole affair.”

Both commanders in chief? That wariness seemed like more than “just a tad.”

“They must both be quite strict given their positions,” I remarked.

Christo responded with a bright laugh. “You’re not wrong. You might think Kakana would be the real hard-ass when you meet her, but keep your eye on Gawin—he’s the *real* crafty one. He’ll look as if he’s taking nothing seriously, but he’s probably the most alert guy in the room.”

I would expect as much. You wouldn’t reach such a high rank if you were really so lax; you’d only be causing issues for both those around and under you.

Christo turned back to Prince Hiero. “Now it’s your turn. What kind of fun little show can we expect from you guys in the face of such annoying restrictions and constant surveillance?”

The answer to this question must have been what Prince Hiero wanted to discuss inside the airship. Oh well, nothing would have changed the fact that I was tired at the time. Sure, ninety percent of the fault was with me, but that other ten percent was on Prince Hiero himself.

“I thought up various options, though since I didn’t know how strict the conditions would be, I came up with them without factoring all that in. A lot of my ideas will definitely be ruled out now, but I do have some that we could still use.”

“Guess you aren’t the acting chairman for nothing. Fire away.”

Learning of the conditions for our recording had increased the number of logistics we had to discuss by an explosive amount. What gaps or loopholes could we find in the conditions set to us?

Apparently, this was something that had happened back in Altoire as well. Nowadays, magivision was normalized back home, but back when it was first implemented, influential aristocrats had strongly opposed the idea, limiting where recordings could take place. Prince Hiero—who’d had no choice but to learn on the job—and Mirko had been in the industry while all of that had been going down, so a lot of their opinions and experiences from back then overlapped greatly with our current predicament.

At some point, everyone had forgotten Christo and Crowen's status, and our meeting proceeded smoothly until late into the night.

"I booked rooms for everyone, but maybe we don't need them," Christo said, looking out over the piles of corpses scattered about the room. It would definitely be easier to let them all rest where they were for now.

The moment we'd arrived, we'd been shoved into the hotel and only had time for a few very brief breaks as our meeting dragged on. A lot of the production crew had ended up nodding off along the way. Project proposals, notes, and crunched-up balls of paper containing rejected ideas were scattered all over the tables. Whenever we ended up stuck on some issue, people would splay out over the table while thinking to themselves, and others would take a quick nap on the beds or sofas.

I felt like I was looking over an army of soldiers who had returned from a well-fought battle and were completely down for the count.

Honestly, even I was exhausted. Prince Hiero, Mirko, Christo, Crowen, and the staff members who managed to stay awake might have looked fine at a cursory glance, but I was sure they were all feeling it themselves.

"We'll conclude the meeting here, then. Good job, everyone." The moment Prince Hiero announced the end of the meeting, the remaining staff members all collapsed on the spot.

Seriously, good job hanging in there.

Our discussion had finally reached a conclusion. After endless back-and-forths, debates upon debates, we'd narrowed down the proposals enough to have an attack plan for the next day. The late night had been worth it; we'd finalized an exciting wedding ceremony that showcased as much of the potential of magivision as possible while also staying within the bounds of the rules.

The original request from the bride and groom hadn't really *asked* for us to make it exciting since they primarily wanted us to leave a record of the event, but this was the biggest and best chance for us to market magivision to a foreign country. It would be such a waste to not go all out. How could we

expect to change the views of the masses if we overlooked such a grand opportunity?

This was absolutely the right moment to go on the offensive. It was not the time to show any restraint or any mercy.

“Christo, Crow, what are you guys gonna do? Go home?” Prince Hiero asked while gathering up all the scattered papers.

It was already late. As people of such high status, I imagined it wasn’t advisable for them to be going out and about at this hour—though I was sure they had their own bodyguards watching out for them.

“Kinda feels like we’ll be wasting time we could be using on the job tomorrow if we go home now and then have to come back. We’re already here, may as well book ourselves a room. Agreed, Crow?”

“Agreed. Tomorrow’s an early start, so it makes things easier. Never mind that, I’m pooped... Hiero, are your meetings always like this?” Crowen asked, circling her stiff shoulders.

The prince gave her a sheepish grin. “They’re rarely this long. This time, we had so much to figure out last minute that we ended up squishing everything into one day instead of the usual several.”

So things weren’t usually so cramped. It was certainly a dense meeting with a rich flavor to it.

“You must be tired too, Nia,” Prince Hiero said, turning to me this time. “Feel free to go rest up.”

I would have loved to fall asleep right then, but there was something else I had to do first.

“Before that, I have a request. Your Imperial Highnesses, would either of you be able to accompany me?”

“A request?” they both said in unison.

“I’d like to meet with our supervisors and discuss tomorrow’s schedule with them. We have so little time I’d like to get this out of the way as soon as possible.”

“Ah, I see your angle,” Christo responded, folding his arms in thought.

“Not a bad idea. It’s a bit late for it, but still not bad,” Crowen approved, nodding to herself.

Glad they understand what I’m going for.

Commanders in chief Gawin and Kakana of Vanderouge would be the two supervisors who would accompany us to tomorrow’s recording. The first thing I wanted to do was confirm their stance on the matter—would they be cooperative or so uncooperative that they would try to disrupt our plans? Depending on their attitudes, they could delay our departure time at their own whim. I wouldn’t put it past them to pull undeniably childish tricks to put pressure on our schedule, like pretending they didn’t know what time they were meant to arrive. The last thing we needed was to have to deal with people trying to deliberately hold us back.

Secondly, I truly did want to make our introductions now. If we could get those done in advance, we wouldn’t have to waffle around them tomorrow, so it would save us some time. The sooner we showed how serious we were about this, the better.

If they were willing to cooperate with us, they would likely adjust their plans as they needed to suit us. If they weren’t, then I needed to deal with that before it caused an issue. Depending on how resistant they were, I was more than willing to threaten them so thoroughly they’d be frightened to the depths of their souls.

We didn’t have the time to waste nor could we afford to lose this chance to create the first real stepping stone to selling magivision in Vanderouge. This was a time we had to greedily aim for the very best outcome.

Confirming their stance and introducing ourselves—for now, those were the two things I wanted to settle before we went to bed. If the situation called for it, I’d beat them up. *Everyone here is going through such a tough time to make this a success. I won’t cut you any slack.*

“I’ll go,” Prince Hiero immediately offered, but I shook my head.

“You can’t. I should be the one to go. Weren’t you the one who wanted to

keep this as apolitical as possible?” Despite his current role, Hiero was still a prince. He might have been the acting chairman of a broadcasting station, but a prince was still a prince. In my opinion, it wasn’t a good idea for him to go personally greet two military personnel and carelessly lower his position by making it clear he was counting on them tomorrow.

It didn’t matter if he valued his work over his position as royalty, he was still a prince.

On the other hand, though I was of aristocracy, I was still just a child. Such a perception of me meant that I was less likely to cause offense.

There was also the risk that they would try to threaten us, and I refused to stand by and let the thoughts and feelings of those in some vague “supervisor” role let all our efforts go to waste. We’d already put in so much manpower, resources, effort, opportunities, and emotions.

I don’t care if you’re a so-called supervisor. Mess things up and I’ll beat you up.

“I’ll go with you, then,” Christo offered. “I’m actually decently acquainted with the commanders. They’re not really the kind to let personal feelings get in the way of their duties, but I do agree that we should let them know our plans directly. If things don’t go to plan tomorrow, all our efforts today will have been for nothing.”

“True. That would definitely feel real frustrating.” Crowen’s opinion was no doubt the one shared by the sleeping production crew. And me, of course.

“Should we get going, then? I’ll send them a heads-up we’ll be heading over, so we’ll have time to stop off somewhere to eat beforehand. I’ve heard stocks of blood cross crabs are at an all-time high and they taste delicious. Let’s go eat some.”

That name of the beast was already so nostalgic. *I’ve never had crab before. Does it taste nice?* “I’ll leave all of that up to you.”

“Sure thing. I know of all the best locations to make a lady happy,” Christo said with a wink.

I thought this boy just *seemed* like a playboy, but no, apparently he really was

one. “I’m not even a teenager yet, you know. Are you sure you’re content with me?”

“Heh, being a lovely lady has nothing to do with age. Uh, I...don’t mean that in an inappropriate way, to be clear.”

Good. It would be terrible if he did. Even if it were the case, I could navigate my way around it fine, but a certain someone would almost certainly be out for his head. *Lynokis, I may be the only one who can detect it, but I can feel your hostility from here. Hide it. In fact, don’t be hostile toward him at all.*

And so, the production for the first ever wedding magivision program began.

Preparations for inviting people to participate in the couple’s special day—if you were to ask what we were doing, that would about sum it up. Should we succeed, it would become a great asset in showing the wonders of the technology.

Though on that same token, the price we would pay for failure was also that much greater. I didn’t even want to consider it.

“We’re starting *this* early?” Commander Gawin was wearing his unkempt military uniform and had arrived at our designated location without looking all that bothered.

“It’s an unnatural time. I can’t say I approve of it.” On the other hand, Commander Kakana’s uniform was the picture of orderly and she made no attempt to hide her displeasure.

It was the early morning—or late night depending on who you asked. But despite us asking to meet at a time so early that night was not yet behind us, our supervisors had met up with us as we’d agreed.

We had all left the hotel bright and early and rode our skiffs to the home of our supervisors. And when we arrived, those who would be traveling with us today were waiting.

So this is Commander Gawin, known for being a bit of an airhead, and this is Commander Kakana, the youngest ever to become commander in chief of the Air Force. I appreciated how much easier Kakana was to read. She was your

typical by the book military commander, and I knew well how to handle those types.

Gawin, on the other hand, was *much* harder to get a grip of. He might have looked relaxed, but that had to be a deliberate mask. This was the kind of person it was impossible to truly understand.

In the morning, both of them gave the same impression as the initial one I'd had when Christo had introduced me to them last night. Gawin looked very laid-back at a glance, but you could sense that he was a much smarter man than he let on. Kakana looked strict at a glance, and was in fact strict.

They were nobles who had left home and were now living in a large house in Eunesgo. It was like a small mansion, really. And they were staying in it together.

That fact surprised me a little—apparently, the two were lovers, but they weren't married. Everyone had their own circumstances, I suppose.

Anyway, yesterday, we'd managed to talk a little, and now today, when we arrived bright and early as we said we would, Gawin in his green military uniform and Kakana in her white were ready and waiting for us.

They had each prepared about five of their own troops, a looming threat that they would stop us by force if they felt things were going too far.

From what I could tell of our conversation yesterday, neither of them showed any signs of being uncooperative. They complained a little that we'd called on them so suddenly and at such a late time, but they were never unkind. Honestly, I didn't want to get in a fight either, so I made no move to intimidate them.

I wasn't sure what they really thought, but on the surface at least, they intended to fully carry out the emperor's orders.

"Commander Gawin, Commander Kakana, thank you for your time today. Let us waste no time in being on our way." Upon Prince Hiero's words, the production crew—who had been lined up in a row for the purposes of introduction—returned to our transport.

Several skiffs were parked along the wide stretching road in front of the

commanders' house, both the skiffs that our group had arrived in, and the skiffs prepared for the army. First thing was to make our way to the port.

"You guys should board too," Christo said. "We're going to be moving out right away."

"Understood."

"Roger."

Gawin and Kakana boarded their skiffs along with their men.

I wouldn't say that I was completely confident in today, but it really would be a true race against time.

Let's get this long day started.

Chapter 2: Wedding Preparations

Once we arrived at the port, we split into two groups. We'd already told the commanders about this plan yesterday, so they didn't complain as they split into their respective forces. Our production crew had brought along twelve people, so it was easy enough to split the group equally, especially since we'd brought two of each position, from directors to makeup artists.

"I made sure we had potential substitutes just in case," Prince Hiero had said. Though I imagine he hadn't expected we'd end up splitting into two groups like this. Or...maybe he did? He seemed capable of predicting that much.

In any case, we'd be acting in two teams for now. Team one included Prince Hiero, Mirko, and Crowen. Team two had me and Christo. Lynokis said that she would both act as my personal attendant and assist with the recording today. Well, it was more like I'd asked her to help, but still.

Though we had three members of royalty with us, there was no need for additional security detail, since army commanders would be accompanying them. We didn't have time to waste, so it was good to cut out any unnecessary rabble and travel light.

"Miss Kakana, let's go."

"All right."

Visiting Gawin and Kakana the day prior hadn't been a waste of time at all. When I'd reported my impressions of them to Prince Hiero, he immediately offered to take the more troublesome Gawin. To be honest, I agreed it was much better for the prince to handle him, so I took the Air Force commander without complaint.

I couldn't read Gawin whatsoever. If he endlessly moaned about things while also not hiding that he was actually a schemer, I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't lay a hand on him. Kakana seemed much more frank and to the point.

And so, Ground Force commander in chief Gawin went to team one, while Air

Force commander in chief Kakana went to team two, each team with their own individual production crew. We split up and boarded the two separate airships we'd prepared for the day and immediately set off.

First, we needed to inform the helmsman of our flight path. Vanderouge had so many floating islands that trying to plot a route had been demanding. Being as efficient as possible in our flights between islands was crucial.

"What an absurd plan," Kakana muttered after Christo detailed the route they had planned on an aeronautical chart in the control room. And we were all thinking it. It *was* an absurd plan. We'd be visiting over twenty floating islands in one day.

But we had to do this. We only had today to do everything.

"First you set out at this unreasonable time, now you want to fly an absurd route... Does this magivision of yours not care at all about common sense or having even a modicum of propriety?"

Her reaction wasn't so strange—to someone unfamiliar with the industry, it must look odd that we were going to such extreme lengths. And so, I told her straight: "If we could get a good recording while abiding by manners and common sense, then we would. It's because we can't that we're doing this."

"A 'good recording'?"

"If you want to see a sunset, then you figure out what time is best to view it, don't you? If you want to see a *pretty* sunset, then you would also be picky about the location. That's basically what this is."

"What...? I can't say I understand the point you're trying to make."

Let me make it even clearer for you, then.

"Right now, we're going to record sights that we won't be able to see if we don't go at the right time and place."

Our first stop was the third island of the high layer. We were going to see a noble lady who served as Zackford's home tutor when he was around my age.

All of this effort was to record words of congratulations from those close to

the couple who were unable to attend their wedding and broadcast them during the reception tomorrow.

“Wait! What is that? H-Hey, I said wait!”

The crew had already started ignoring her. Of course they had—even I was starting to get irritated. It was only a matter of time before my hand slipped and someone got hurt.

The sky was finally turning light. We’d been doing our recordings as fast as possible, so we were already on our fourth stop. We still had a long list to go, so the production crew were setting up as fast and efficiently as possible.

Everything had been going smoothly. These recording sessions were guaranteed to find us pressed for time, so everyone was much more nervous than usual. Their brisk movements were indicative of the tension in the air. Everyone knew there was no room for error.

Even I was focused on not making mistakes.

Pointless arguments would result in souring the atmosphere even further and be an absolute waste of time, so I wanted to avoid them. As such, I was being as attentive as possible to what was going on around me so I could step in as a mediator if need be. I would support the staff through any mishaps and explain everything about the recording process to the guest.

We were so frantic that even Lynokis prioritized helping carry equipment, contributing to the recording without complaint, even though it meant distancing herself from me. *I know I asked her to help, but I wasn’t expecting her to be this willing.*

Even though our schedule was basically asking for the impossible, it was because everyone was aware of the difficulty that they were much more serious than usual. Enough that it was a little worrying.

And yet, despite us being in such a state, despite us all clearly being so on edge, Kakana would constantly pester us without restraint, asking what this or that we were using was.

I wouldn’t pretend I didn’t understand her. Everything she was seeing and

doing was essentially an entirely foreign culture to her. I could only assume that, as our supervisor, she wanted to understand exactly what we were doing; it was a sign of her diligence and skill.

But this was the absolute worst timing.

Everyone was so frantically trying to get things done, the last thing we needed was for her to constantly stop them to ask questions. I'd asked her several times now to hold her questions until we were back on the airship, but she refused to listen.

I wouldn't pretend I didn't understand this either. If we were doing something she deemed dangerous, asking about it on the airship would be too late. Her wanting to prevent casualties before they happened was just a sign of her extreme caution to protect both herself and her country.

But seriously, this was *the* worst timing.

"Miss Kakana, please don't stop the staff like that." I'd seen her go to stop a member of the staff by trying to grab their hand, so I immediately stepped in. That was the sixth time I'd said that now. It was so early in the morning that the sky had only just started to lighten, and yet I had said it *six times*.



“But I’ve never seen anything like that before,” Kakana insisted.

“We call those reflectors. They’re just reflective surfaces that help reflect light onto whatever we’re recording so it shows better on camera,” I explained.

For our first three recordings, the locations had bright natural lighting, so we hadn’t needed to pull out the reflectors. This fourth one was being recorded in a commoner’s house, though. Given we were only allowed to record within the premises, we needed to record this inside the guest’s room—they didn’t have a garden we could use.

If there wasn’t a very good source of light in the room, the environment would end up too dark for the cameras. In which case, the easy solution was to reflect the light to where we needed it to be. If we didn’t, there would be shadows falling over the subject’s face and we wouldn’t be able to make them out very well on the MagiPad.

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting. Um, do I really look good enough with these clothes...?” the young lady nervously asked, tugging at the sleeves of her old-fashioned dress.

“You look perfect! Please, this way!” the makeup artist reassured her, beckoning the guest to sit on the seat beside her so she could quickly get her makeup done.

Not only did the lady not quite understand everything that was going on, but we’d turned up at her door while she was still sleeping and she hadn’t even had the chance to do her morning routine yet. Her confusion was great.

That didn’t change what we had to do, though. In fact, once we were done here, she could go back to sleep again if she wanted. We just needed her to cooperate with us for now. I felt bad, but this was the only time we had to do this.

“H-Hey! What is that?! Is it a marshmallow?!”

“It’s just a powder puff,” I replied. “Why do you not know this...?” Kakana wore makeup, didn’t she? How did she not know something as basic as that? Did people do their makeup differently in Vanderouge?

Oh, you leave everything to your maids. I see.

“What about that?! Is that not a comb?!”

“Yes, you are exactly right. It’s the thing you use to get knots out of your hair. Calm down already. You don’t need to ask if you know what it is.” I didn’t mind being paired up with someone so diligent when it came to their job, but there was such a thing as being *too* serious, and Kakana’s behavior definitely crossed that line.

Seeing Kakana be so strict and diligent made me a little curious about her on a personal level, but that wasn’t something I could waste time with right now.

“Nia, if you could!” the director shouted. I shouted back to confirm I’d heard.

I would do a demonstration of the recording just to show how it was done. We had a good stock of manastones to record the images, but that didn’t mean we could waste them. To avoid that scenario, we did a light speech as practice in advance.

“Are you paying attention, Miss Kakana? We need you to be quiet and simply watch for now. Especially make sure you don’t make remarks during the recording; it’ll get picked up.” That was the fourth time now I’d emphasized this. Thankfully, it hadn’t failed so far, but I was terrified of the moment it did.

“I can’t. There’s just so much I don’t understand. What are you all doing? What is your goal? I understand none of it.”

I certainly wouldn’t pretend I didn’t understand why she was so confused, but... Right now, the recording was of the utmost priority.

“‘I can’t’ doesn’t fly here. Listen to her, I’m begging you.” Christo swooped in to my rescue. “I understand you’re on orders from my father, but you’re meant to be a supervisor. You’re interrupting so much that you’re completely disrupting the crew.”

The image of Christo I had formed in my mind was of a carefree and nonchalant playboy, but even he was touchy in this situation. He was primarily helping carry equipment like Lynokis was, but he was clearly deeply interested in the recording process itself, so he was always fervently observing from a short distance—even he couldn’t stay silent here, though.

“But it’ll be too late if we wait until it happens.”

“Until *what* happens? Literally nothing has gone wrong.”

“Until now it hasn’t, but what about this time? I have absolutely no idea what these people are doing.”

“Didn’t they explain to you *multiple times*? C’mere.”

“But, Your Highness, I need to—!”

Christo grabbed Kakana’s hand and dragged her out of the room, giving me a small nod over his shoulder as he left. *I’ll deal with this pest, so you guys get on with the recording.*

Many of the staff watched as Kakana was removed from the room, and the moment she was gone, they started moving faster.

This is our chance!

“Sorry for the wait. Now, to explain what this recording will consist of...” I then immediately moved on to giving the demonstration.

As for who this half-asleep lady was, she was a low-class noble who had been Phyledia’s classmate at the learning institute until a few years back.

Vanderouge’s learning institute was split into elementary, middle, and high school, same as Altoire, but this woman had graduated after middle school and the two had drifted after that. Nowadays, she lived on her own and was living the commoner life. Though she was a noble, she barely had the opportunity to wear dresses anymore, so she hadn’t purchased any new ones as of late.

“Um, will my voice really reach Phyle?”

Though they had drifted apart, it clearly hadn’t been on bad terms. When we told her the reason we had come, that Zackford and Phyledia would be getting married the next day, she had been quite literally jumping with joy. Right after waking up too.

“Not just your voice, but your appearance as well,” I told her. She still didn’t quite seem to understand how it worked, but she looked happy regardless.

“Young Mistress, I have a suggestion.”

After recording the fourth congratulatory message, we packed up and were immediately on our way. Lynokis spoke up while we were traveling back to the port on the large skiff.

“I believe it might be easier to convince Commander Kakana our intentions are not nefarious if we show her the recording itself.”

The only people in this skiff were me, Lynokis, and Christo, accompanied by a large piece of equipment. The staff had been learning to treat Christo more casually after that passionate meeting yesterday, but he was still an imperial prince, so we decided to keep him separate. I didn’t think anyone would mind by this point, especially not Christo, but we wanted to keep things rolling.

Besides, he was the one driving the skiff right now. And by he, I did mean the prince.

“You mean show her what we just recorded?” I asked.

“Yes. It is the simplest evidence to show what we’ve been doing. People like her are generally quick to fold when presented with physical proof.”

I see. Well, I wasn’t sure if she would give in *quick*, but I could see it being effective. Was that something we could even do, though?

“If you can do it, it’d be a good idea,” Christo spoke up, face solemn. “You’ve probably noticed how the production crew are starting to treat her rougher, right? Well, the men she’s brought with her have picked up on that and are starting to get worked up. This could escalate into a fight if it continues.”

Tch, did they all have to be so annoying to handle? We’re so pressed for time too...

“Let’s ask the director, then.” Everything we were recording today was to be used at the reception tomorrow, which meant that it must’ve been possible for us to edit the contents here in Vanderouge somehow. I hadn’t been told any of the details about that side of production, but if it was possible to turn even just one part of what we’d recorded into an edited product right this second, it would be good to show to Kakana.

If we didn't do anything now, we'd just end up fighting. Fighting with Kakana meant fighting with a foreign army; unsurprisingly, we would much rather avoid that. Only despair awaited if the recording was canceled, and it would absolutely have an effect on magivision sales.

Above all of that, though, I was getting very close to snapping. It wasn't as if I were in the best mood myself. I had literally just come off of a ridiculous recording schedule back home and now I was being made to go through it again. Though I would admit that the fact I wasn't the one having to appear on-screen made things much easier on me.

I made the proposal to the staff while we were on our way to the next island. Having also been slowly getting more frustrated with Kakana's constant interference, they immediately agreed. Even they had been feeling like it would be bad news if things continued as they were, and no wonder. Get into an altercation with the army and your own life would be at risk, after all.

We immediately called Kakana over and showed her an edited version of the first congratulatory message we'd recorded so she could see for herself the sort of thing we were preparing for the wedding tomorrow; we would allow them to preserve the events of the wedding forever so they could remember the emotions of their special day whenever they wished.

Kakana stared silently at the MagiPad as if she were entranced the entire time the recording played.

"Congratulations on your wedding!"

"May I see it once more?" she asked over and over again, eyes fixed on the frame.

"I see... So that's what this is. I see. I get it now..." She nodded her head several times. "I understand now exactly what you're doing, why you're doing it, and the reason you're in such a rush."

When Kakana finally raised her head from the MagiPad, her eyes were slightly glassy.

"There are old friends of the couple who cannot be invited because of a

difference in class, and yet they have been given the opportunity to voice their congratulations through your recording. Both Master Zackford Huskitan and Mistress Phyledia Cauculis will no doubt be overjoyed. I may cry myself if I were in the bride's shoes." Kakana pulled out a handkerchief and lightly dabbed at her eyes. I imagined it wouldn't be tactful for me to point out how she was already crying.

"How many more residences do you need to visit?" she asked.

"Twenty-two, and it has to be done by tonight." After that, the editors would pull an all-nighter preparing the footage. Another big reason the staff were so on edge was because they knew that they had no chance of getting a decent break until the wedding ceremony was over. They all knew they were charging headfirst into the hell of endless work. We had no time, no leeway in the schedule, and definitely no space for our minds to be allowed to rest. Who wouldn't get irritable?

"Will you manage it at this pace? Hmm... No, looking at your flight path, you're cutting it close. All right, I'll send my men ahead."

What? For what purpose?

"I can have my men ask the interviewees to get ready. I imagine you've filled in the more influential nobles about what you need them to do in detail, but everyone else you've only asked to remain at home, right? Even having someone go ahead to ask them to get changed would make things go much faster when you arrive."

Wonderful.

"Are you sure you'd be willing to do that?" I asked. We'd already considered something similar ourselves, but determined we just didn't have the manpower or time for it. All this was a plan we'd decided upon only yesterday, after all; we were too short on resources to go for such a method—we wouldn't have even been able to prepare more airships to allow us to split up.

However, things would be different for a member of the army. What was more, it was the commander in chief of the Air Force. She could prepare all the people and airships she wanted.

“You sure about this, Kakana? Ain’t this an abuse of power?” Christo was grinning as he said those words.

Kakana turned her gaze back down to the MagiPad. “The only thing that’s happening here is me asking my men to carry out a personal request while on their break. I am not personally acquainted with Mistress Phyledia Cauculis...but as a woman myself, I do not want her once-in-a-lifetime wedding to fail. If I am to be this involved, I want it to succeed.”

As a woman herself, hm? If I recalled correctly, she was in a relationship with Commander Gawin, but they weren’t married. Not that that was something for me to comment on. We all had our own circumstances.

I had thought of Kakana as nothing but a troublesome enemy, but she had now unexpectedly become a trustworthy ally. Our recording speed would definitely pick up now.

By being shown an example of the real thing, Kakana had caught up immediately.

“It feels a little weird. It’s like it’s not even me.”

“A surprising number of people feel that way.”

“Congratulations on your wedding. Now that I’ve been given the opportunity, I’d like to celebrate the occasion.”

Kakana was watching herself on the MagiPad with a strange look on her face. There were quite a lot of people who saw themselves on magivision and thought they looked like a different person than who they saw in the mirror. Even their voice sounded foreign to their ears. They felt weird watching themselves, even a little embarrassed.

Given my circumstances, I had never personally felt that way—because I *was* a different person than the one reflected in the frame. I hadn’t become used to seeing the appearance of Nia Liston even before I ended up on magivision, so the whole process of watching myself felt no different.

A lot of people did feel differently, though.

“I think we can use this.” The director’s approval was immediate.

Usually, we would go to the location of the shoot, explain to the guest what we needed them to do, and then begin recording, but then an idea was raised: create an example message in advance to cut down on the time spent for that explanation; it would be much easier to just show the subjects what they had to do, after all.

In other words, we’d create a sample recording and show it to them in the same way we’d shown an example to Kakana. And as it turned out, we had the *perfect* person to use for one such example already right here.

“While we’re here, why don’t we have Miss Kakana be the star?” I had suggested.

The congratulatory messages we had recorded so far weren’t suitable as examples. We had recorded them for the express purpose of being shown at Zackford and Phyledia’s wedding. The only reason we showed some of the recording to Kakana was because we had no time and needed to present our case to our supervisor. That wasn’t something that we should make a habit of doing. They were personal messages like letters, after all.

As such, we needed to prepare something new for the example, and that was where Kakana Lesiegin came in. Not only had she come to an understanding in terms of what we were doing, but she also had the title of a commander in chief of the army. As far as trust from the citizens of Vanderouge was concerned, she had it in spades.

We had one of their princes with us, but he was more like a trump card. He would use his name if he deemed it necessary, but otherwise he was accompanying us incognito. Hell, he was even acting as the helmsman for our transport.

“Hmm? Uh, I’m not doing this. You can’t choose me. No. I said I can’t do this. I can’t... Hey, stay back. Don’t come so close. H-Hey! What is that?! It looks like lipstick!”

That’s because it is lipstick.

These were the moments that made the professionalism of our staff clear.

They saw what seemed like an interesting idea and immediately jumped on Kakana, getting her all prettied up at the speed of light. The makeup Kakana already wore was light, so they redid it to make her face look a little brighter and added a natural pink lipstick.

“We have no time!”

“We can’t mess around!”

“Stop squirming!”

The staff scolded Kakana through her complaining, and in the end, we managed to prepare an example congratulatory message.

“Her posture is beautiful—you can tell she’s been through military training. Her gaze is so intense, and her enunciation is so pleasant to the ears.”

“Yeah, she’d do well in pictures for sure. If we recorded her having a drink at some refined bar, it’d sell like hotcakes.”

“I agree. You just have to look at her and you can tell she’s a mature woman.”

“I can’t get enough of the moments where girls who look perfect on the surface mess up and you see a crack in the facade.”

“What a mood!”

Yeah, our team was made of pros. The way a recording was viewed was down to how the creator designed it. I could practically see all the ideas popping up in their heads—they wanted to record Kakana in a way that made her look even more beautiful. They wanted to record her in a situation or program that played to her strengths.

Even I was finding possible ideas conjured up in my brain. She seemed like she could serve as a good replacement for Bendelio as the host on *Tales of a Liston Stroll*.

While everyone was getting excited over the possibilities, Kakana was off to the side, clearly deeply embarrassed as she muttered, “Could you all stop...?”

With Kakana’s troops going on ahead and us now with an example in hand, our recordings proceeded smoothly.

“With a long day ahead, it’s nice to have something to look forward to. As such, I bought these.”

After finishing one of the recordings and boarding the airship, we found that Lynokis had brought a bunch of cakes. It was a light, simple dessert of seasonal jam and cream sandwiched pieces of thin, flaky pastry. They were small enough that a large adult man could probably eat it in one go. They were a popular dessert in Vanderouge known as hinoque sandwiches.

The production crew were at least acquainted with Lynokis because she always accompanied me, but she always remained in the back and never spoke during recordings, so everyone was surprised at her sudden forwardness. Regardless, they all gratefully partook in the gift.

“Your Highness, allow me to test it for poison.”

“Ooh, you’ll go halvesies with me, Kakana?”

“I...I question your wording, but yes.”

Christo being a prince meant that they had to remain alert for possible attempts on his life, but since it was bought from a regular unaffiliated shop that would have no ulterior motives, even Kakana wasn’t so wary.

“Young Mistress, shall we ‘go halvesies’?”

Unfortunately, it seemed that the playboy prince’s turn of phrase had resonated with my attendant.

“When have you ever tested my food for poison?”

“I have simply reevaluated the importance of such a task. Now, let’s share it. Let’s split it in half like good friends.”

Splitting it in half like good friends and splitting it in half so it could be tested for poison were two very different things... But whatever made her happy.

After getting a taste for “going halvesies,” Lynokis bought a little something at every floating island we visited. Oftentimes, they were hinoque sandwiches, but each island had its own local specialties or unique flavors. At the very least it gave us something to look forward to as she’d said.



What dessert will we get at the next island? Such a small pleasure served as a form of salvation that placated our minds during such a frantic time. My favorite was the hinoque sandwich filled with tea-infused cream. It had the most delicious aroma.

With the unexpected helping hand and a little innovative thinking, we managed to finish our plan that not long before had seemed impossible. Our final recording was completed well into the night.

We returned to our hotel in Eunesgo at around midnight. Spending over half a day traveling and recording had left not just me, but also Lynokis, the staff, Christo, and Kakana completely exhausted in both mind and body. Dragging our heavy bodies back to the luxurious hotel room, everyone fell to the floor like dominoes—most of them really did collapse then and there.

“Welcome back. Today was tough, huh?” Prince Hiero came out to greet us, but we barely had the senses for that right now. Everyone really was exhausted. Working all the way through from morning to night was a first even for me. *This* was what you called a work schedule from hell.

Even Christo had collapsed onto the floor—in a way that made him look like he was sleeping with the makeup artist. His exhaustion was so great that he couldn’t spare any energy to think about how he looked to those around him anymore.

I felt ready to collapse too, but I somehow managed to drag myself to a table. I would probably fall asleep the second I lost focus. Even Lynokis looked tired.

“Your team was back early.” Kakana, who was no doubt used to intense spartan military training that simulated the roughest of conditions, appeared fine on the surface, but sometimes, I caught her nodding off, so she must have been feeling it too.

“Our group hasn’t finished our work, after all. Us being back earlier than your team was according to plan.”

Right, Prince Hiero’s team was to return to the hotel a little earlier so they could get working on the editing. In other words, we’d essentially prepared a

rotation postproduction.

Though he was saying “early,” they still wouldn’t have returned until late into the evening. The plan was for the teams to take turns—while one slept, the other would work, allowing us to keep the editing going and have the final recording ready in time for the wedding tomorrow. We also had to make preparations for the recording of the wedding ceremony itself.

Let me be clear: this hell was not yet over. Especially for the production crew.

“So your work doesn’t end here...” Though Kakana had been hiding her fatigue well, her expression was now clearly taking on both exhaustion and exasperation. It seemed she couldn’t hide her feelings toward the schedule any longer.

“You should only need to supervise the recording process itself,” Prince Hiero said. “We won’t be recording anything else tonight, so you should get your rest, commander. Commander Gawin is already resting in a separate room.” Apparently, so was Crowen. Clearly, the princess was exhausted too.

“A-Ah, is that so? I *was* told that I only had to supervise you during recordings, but...”

“Is something bothering you?”

“You will now be doing this ‘editing’ process, yes? I’m a little curious what that entails...”

“Ahh... I’m sorry, but we can’t let you watch. It would mean letting you be privy to the trade secrets of magivision.”

“So it’s handled as a national secret, after all.” As Vanderouge was known for having the most cutting-edge airship technology, they naturally kept similar details confidential, so the commander was not surprised by such an attitude.

I’m getting tired too...

“Are you becoming interested in magivision as well, commander?”

“Maybe a little... I’d already heard some things about it, but today was the first time I’d seen it in person. Everyone was kind enough to tell me so much about it.” And by everyone, she meant me, Christo, and the rest of the

production crew. Once she had more of an idea of what magivision was, Kakana had ended up so curious that she was no longer wary, but instead asked us endless questions for the sake of her own curiosity.

“In that case, you should watch some of the recordings I brought specifically for the purpose of advertising magivision. Ask Commander Gawin to join you. Nia Liston appears in some of them since she’s famous in Altoire.”

Kakana looked over at me. I was so ridiculously tired that my brain wasn’t working properly. “He’s right,” was all I managed to say.

“Then I would love to borrow them.”

After teaching Kakana how to use the device, Prince Hiero lent the commander a type of magic circle integrated with a plate along with a MagiPad and the required manastone. If you put a manastone storing image data on top of the plate, the contents would appear on the MagiPad or...something like that. *No, seriously, I’m at my limit here.*

“The rest of you should get some sleep as well. The baths have been prepared, and if you’re hungry, you can order anything you like. You get your ass up too, Christo. Don’t sleep here. Nia, you should go back to your room so you can get some proper sleep. You’ll be on-screen tomorrow, so it wouldn’t be good for you to be noticeably tired.”

Phew, so this really is the end of today’s work. It was an ironclad rule to get rest at any moment possible during notably long sessions like this. I felt bad for the staff that still had editing work to finish off, but I would take the prince up on his offer. It wasn’t as if I could help with this part of the process, so my job now was to make sure I was in tip-top condition for tomorrow.

The staff would put in all their effort to edit the recordings and get them ready in time.

I would put in all my effort to rest completely.

They had their work and I had mine. That was all.

“If you’ll excuse me, then.”

I would leave everything to them and rest.

I returned to my hotel room and quickly washed up in the bath. I could wash my hair tomorrow morning.

My slowly fading consciousness was sucked into sleep the moment I jumped into bed.

The next day, I woke up early and immediately washed my hair. I was able to fit in a little downtime to enjoy some morning tea, but then I headed for the lavish room that had practically been turned into an office for the production crew.

“The twenty-seventh recording is finished if someone could check it please!”

“Cut out this part! These two parts are perfect!”

“Seven recordings left!”

It seemed work was in its final stages. Prince Hiero was checking over all of the recordings and giving detailed instructions and feedback. His title as the acting chairman of the Altoire Broadcasting Station was not for show, and the staff were reacting promptly to his directions—all while looking exhausted.

“Good morning,” I greeted, as I walked into the room after the makeup artist—who had considerably more freedom after doing a simple check of her makeup inventory—let me in.

“Morning, Nia,” the prince greeted in return. “Sorry for springing this on you after you just got here, but would you mind carrying all the equipment to the airships?”

Oh my, getting put to work already. Though given it was carrying equipment, he likely meant he wanted me to ask Lynokis to do it after all her assistance with it yesterday.

“I’ll get right on it with my attendant.”

“Thanks. Once we’re finished here, we’ll do some final checks while we have breakfast.” He turned to the makeup artist. “Hey, would you mind asking Christo, Crowen, and the commanders to start making their way to the restaurant?”

“Yes, sir!” she enthusiastically responded, dashing out of the room.

Lynokis and I worked together to carry all of the equipment to the large skiff already waiting outside the hotel. With everything we’d brought for both the recording and the wedding itself, it was quite a lot to transport. Once we’d finished that task, one of the staff boarded the skiff and it set off. Apparently, they were going to bring the equipment to the venue in advance.

Still, today’s weather was lovely. Hopefully, that was a good sign; it was a beautiful day for a wedding.

Before long, the editing was completed, and everyone gathered in a private room in the restaurant. The imperial prince and princess, along with our military supervisors, had breakfast with us while we had our meeting. There were those still tired from yesterday, those with prominent unshaven stubble on their face, those who barely seemed affected by the hellish schedule from yesterday, and those who had managed to get in enough rest that they were completely recovered for today.

The wedding would start in the afternoon, but we had to get to the venue early to get everything set up. Those who had worked until morning would get washed up and have a little rest so they could make themselves look presentable before joining us. Those who hadn’t would be going straight to the venue.

Time for the real thing! Let’s keep our spirits high!

A sudden rush of guests exited the impressive temple after the newlywed couple had finished their wedding vows.

This was the wedding ceremony of the eldest son of the Huskitan family—famous nobles in the Vanderouge Empire—and the eldest daughter of the Cauculises—high-ranking nobles within the Kingdom of Marvelia.

All who had been invited came under the umbrella of distinguished persons. There were many members of Vanderouge and Marvelian royalty present, making for a gathering of prominent figures scarcely seen even at noble gatherings. Prince Hiero, as a representative of the Kingdom of Altoire, had also

discreetly sat in on the proceedings.

Since the wedding ceremony was more on the reserved side, the influence of the couple's families on the proceedings was great. Unfortunately, Phyledia's grandparents had been too ill to attend, so that led to the decision to decrease the allowed guests.

It was all quite troublesome, but that was nobles for you—they were always so pressed about keeping up appearances. Apparently, it had something to do with making sure neither family had fewer guests than the other so as to not cause distrust between them or to cause any sort of gossip.

I thought it sounded quite pointless, to be honest, but it seemed important to the nobility. Things could be more casual after they were officially married, but until then, the two families had to do enough to not embarrass their names.

The age range of the guests was vast. Our cameras waiting on standby outside of the temple recorded them all in their splendid attire. They'd had our involvement explained to them in advance, so even though there were those who couldn't help but keep curiously glancing at us, no one said anything.

Team one had been able to get a cameraman into the temple to record the exchanging of the wedding vows, so that likely helped them get used to the idea.

The couple exited the temple to the applause of all the guests. The groom was a young well-built man wearing a white suit, and the bride was a woman with dark brown hair wearing a spectacular white dress adorned with beautiful lace. Having exchanged their vows of happiness in front of the gods, the happiest pair in the world right now had taken each other by the arms and were walking down the path while being showered in the onlookers' blessings.

Though I wasn't as close with them, I would at least pray for their good fortune myself.

And now, onto the next step.

"I'll be heading out, then," I said, informing the director and Kakana (who were in charge of this area) and then running off.

I entered not the front entrance of the temple where the couple and the

guests had just exited from, but the small entrance around the side where team one and Gawin were waiting. After meeting up with them, we headed off to the next location.

Team one had managed to record everything that went down inside the building and team two had recorded them exiting the building. With this, the first half recording was complete. We would have no break before jumping into the second half.

Our next recording location was at the Huskitan Estate. The two skiffs holding the half of the production crew that included Prince Hiero and myself arrived before the couple and the guests. Gawin was also with us as a supervisor.

We'd arrived ahead of everyone so we could record the couple once they arrived, and then the guests when they arrived a little later too.

The second half of the wedding was the buffet. Preparations for it were already complete, and though the food was yet to be served, the tables were all sitting and waiting in the large garden. The bright white tablecloths were reflecting the light of the sun. I imagined the kitchen was a battlefield right about now.

I really was glad that the weather was so good today. Though even if the weather had been bad, it wouldn't have been a big deal; there was plenty of space inside as well.

"You can record from about here to here."

We had one last briefing with Gawin. We were forbidden from recording outside—or more specifically, recording anything that could result in information on Vanderouge being leaked to other countries—but they'd been willing to loosen the restrictions a little for today.

It was impossible to avoid recording the main house of the Huskitan Estate, so we'd gained permission for that at least. With the exception of everyone's arrival, we needed to use the mansion as a backdrop at all times. Generally, so long as we did that, we were safe.

While we were confirming one last time where it would be okay to record, the

white skiff decorated for the wedding arrived with Zackford and Phyledia onboard.

“Congratulations on your wedding,” I said as I gifted them with a bouquet of flowers after they had disembarked and made their way onto the premises.

“Thank you, Nia.” Phyledia had a gentle smile on her face as she took the flowers, but the smile on Zackford’s sharp features was increasingly stilted. We made sure to catch that moment of them receiving the flowers on camera, with me in the shot.

Phyledia would now get changed into a different dress; in order to show respect to the Huskitans, she had worn a Vanderouge-style dress for the first half of the wedding, but she would now change into a bridal dress designed in her home country of Marvelia. The color would be the same, but apparently the design itself was quite different.

“Allow me.”

“What? Oh...of course.”

After stealing the job of helping Phyledia keep her dress’s train off the ground from one of the servants of the estate, I proceeded to follow them into their waiting room.

“Whew, I’m starting to get a bit tired... Phyle, want some water?” Once they entered a dressing room on the second floor, Zackford immediately poured some water from a pitcher on the table.

The absolute peak of the production crew’s exhaustion had been yesterday and the day before, but for the big day, the ones truly exhausted after just the first half were the newlywed couple. It was a wedding where not only their family members but also foreign royalty were attending—they themselves were probably feeling the pressure to be perfect. *I guess we’re both sticking it out together.*

After this, we would be moving straight into an upper-class social function where they would need to chat with all the guests and have a good drink or two, so this was their only time to rest.

That was exactly why I was here right at this moment.

Once Phyledia had received some water from Zackford, she turned to me. “Now, could I ask what you wanted to talk to us about?”

I’d met with them both in the morning before the wedding started and told them I had something I wished to tell them at this time exactly.

There was a servant of the house waiting ready to help Phyledia change into her second dress, so I couldn’t waste too much time. The guests were also already on their way here.

No time for dillydallying.

“I would like to show you this.” I picked up a MagiPad that had been placed in the room in advance and hovered it above the dressing table, in front of where Phyledia sat and Zackford stood right beside her. “There were many people who wanted to send you congratulatory messages, so we received them for you. You don’t need to worry about crying here, right?”

“What?”

“Crying?”

The couple were confused by my questions, but that was all right—they’d understand the moment I played the recording. Kakana had been teary-eyed and she wasn’t even the bride.

I turned on the MagiPad.

Now, cry away.

This picture had been made with the blood, sweat, and tears of Altoire’s production crew. I could only hope it was to their liking.

Many of our staff had been of the opinion that watching this with the guests would be the most ideal way to go about it. To them, it was an important occasion, but to us, it was an important opportunity to show the appeal of magivision.

Several leading figures were gathered at this event. If our desire was to promote magivision, then showing it right away would absolutely give the

greatest impact.

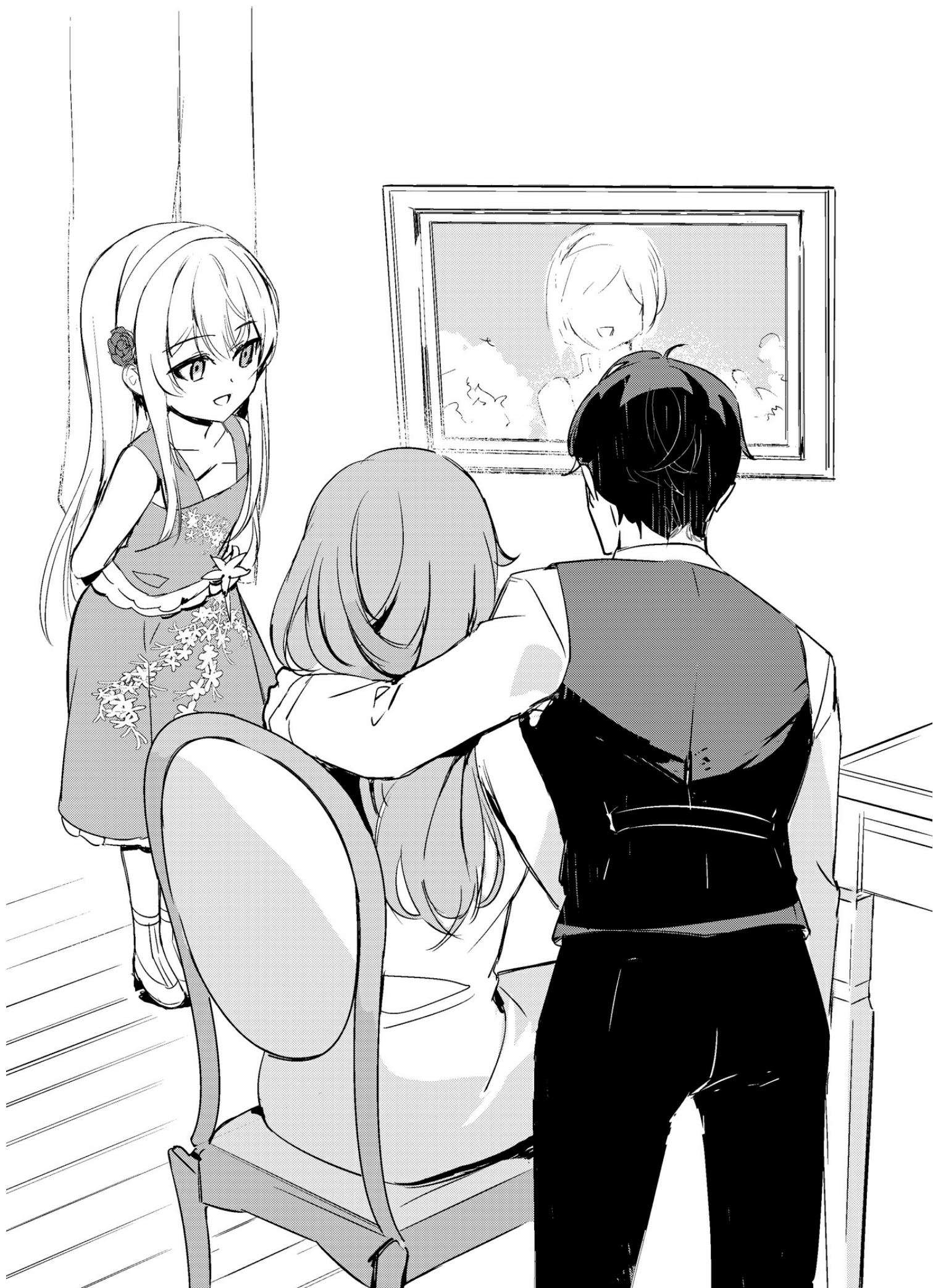
But the one who objected to that majority opinion was none other than Princess Crowen.

“Are you that desperate to make the bride cry? I have no intention of getting married and even I found it hard to keep it together. You might think she would just be happy and thankful, but the reality is her makeup’s gonna smear and her nose is gonna run. Have some respect. Don’t embarrass her,” she’d said.

“What’s worse, she’s gonna already be tense because of the guests that’ll be there. Don’t put her in a situation where she can’t even feel like she can speak for herself.”

And that was why we’d chosen this timing. If we showed it before they changed, we could present it to them as if they were like the blessings from the guests as they left the temple. Guests who were friends of the newlywed couple, yet couldn’t participate in the ceremony directly, however much they wished they could.

There was the question of if they really would end up crying or not, but...



With the first message, they understood what the recording was.

“Oh, this isn’t good. I can’t take this.”

With the second message, Phyledia let out that quiet murmur before she burst into tears.

And yet in the end, the one who ended up crying most was Zackford, the man still tearfully sobbing well after the last message was shown.

“Isn’t all that a bit much...?” The bride was taken aback by her now-husband’s overflowing tears.

Phyledia had managed to gather herself after the first wave, though she might have only ended up stopping out of shock from how dramatically Zackford began crying.

“And that is all.” I picked up the MagiPad once the recording had finished. It looked like even Lynokis in the back was feeling it a little.

After a short, gentle silence, Phyledia smiled at me. “Thank you, Nia. That was a beautiful recording.”

Even though it had already finished, Zackford was still soaking his handkerchief.

“If you want to thank anyone, thank Prince Hiero. This is his gift to you as your friend.”

This MagiPad and the manastone containing the words of congratulations would be his present to the couple along with everything we’d recorded of the big day itself. This act was also within the restrictions set in place. It was only through pledging we would take none of the recordings back to Altoire that Prince Hiero had finally managed to receive permission for all of this.

According to Christo, the emperor had a great deal of caution surrounding magivision. The way Kakana had been acting before she understood what we were doing might have been a reflection of how the emperor also felt. With understanding would come a change in how he treated the technology, one would think.

In any case, we would edit everything we recorded so it was easier to watch and then leave it here in Vanderouge. And then, hopefully, Phyledia would want to bring the manastone to Marvelia in order to show those who couldn't attend, like her grandparents, resulting in her working to receive permission herself.

"Zack might have gotten a little overemotional, but... Yes, this is lovely," Phyledia wistfully stated. "The only people we were allowed to invite today were family friends or those deemed of suitable status. But the people we really wished to celebrate with today were all in those images. They were those we met at the learning institute and became friends with regardless of family or status. We laughed, we cried, we even got mad at each other. For the first time in so long, I got to see so many of my friends again. They were giving blessings just as the present guests did, and yet the weight of these words felt so different. I really felt them in my heart."

I agreed. When we went to receive their congratulatory words, there were many who were crying as they said them. Both parties had cried for each other. It was proof that their bonds were deep.

"S-Sorry... When I saw friends and mentors I hadn't seen in so long, I suddenly got so emotional..." It seemed Zackford had calmed down enough to speak. "I don't think I've cried this much since I was a child. I apologize for showing such a shameful side of myself."

"Seriously. You were really embarrassing."

The bride was certainly a little harsh...

"It made me really nostalgic. The second I saw friends I hadn't met for over ten years...I felt memories well up from when I was about your age, Nia. Thinking back to when we'd play around outside in the garden so much our clothes would be dirty, and then seeing them now, I couldn't help but...but think about...how much they've grown..."

Isn't that what the father of the bride is supposed to say? Seeing his daughter all grown-up makes him all emotional or something?

"You're crying again? Goodness, just get it all out now, then."

This hadn't quite been how I had expected things to go, but as it turned out, Crowen had made a good call. Showing them the recording in advance had been the correct choice.

I *really* hadn't expected the groom to cry far more than the bride, though...

"There is actually one more thing I wish to tell you both."

I had the option to not tell them, but seeing their reactions now—especially the groom's—I decided it would be for the best for them to know in advance.

A chance like this may never come again, so we had to do all we could to achieve the best outcome.

After the bride got changed and the groom washed his face and changed out of the clothes stained with his tears, they made their way out to the entrance hall where the guests had slowly arrived. Zackford looked so sharp you wouldn't think he had been bawling just moments before, and Phyledia looked so regal you wouldn't think she'd just been nagging her husband for crying.

Seeing them together, they really did make for a good pair. Even in terms of personality, they were a good match for each other—the slightly harsh wife with the tolerant husband. Now that I'd had this chance to be involved in their wedding, even I genuinely wished them the best.

The second half of the festivities would now begin. The couple descended the staircase to the applause from the guests.

Or at least, that's what would've happened if I hadn't told them in advance just what exactly we were about to do. They needed to prepare themselves so they wouldn't cry again.

The lights in the entrance hall all went out. Some of the estate's workers had been stationed at the side ready to pull over the curtains the moment that happened, shutting off as much light from getting in as possible.

Good thing we practiced it this morning. Their timing was perfect.

Unsurprisingly, everyone started murmuring between themselves at the sudden darkening of the hall, but then someone noticed what was now there

with an, “Ah!”

“Zack! Phyle! Congratulations on your wedding!”

To the guests’ left was a person who looked far too big to be real.

Everyone was surprised, so much so that some of the ladies and children let out screams. To be honest, even I was surprised. I had known what was coming, but I had never seen such a massive MagiPad before. It was miles bigger than a person.

It must have been one of the large MagiPads that had been in development. Its presence was astounding.

The recording being shown was a further edited version of the celebratory words we had recorded. We cut out a lot of the personal messages intended just for the couple so people wouldn’t get bored, only splicing together all of the direct words of congratulations.

I felt immense déjà vu from team one’s footage. I’d heard that they’d gone to record at the learning institute—the equivalent of Altoire’s academies—but the sight of a bunch of students clumsily shouting a “Congratulations!” in unison reminded me of the school tour we recorded all that time ago with Hildetaura.

In any case, it had quite the effect. I was used to magivision and even I was surprised, so the people of Vanderouge and Marvelia who had little to no experience with magivision were no doubt feeling even more flabbergasted.

The recording felt like it finished in no time at all. Even once the lights came back on, the guests had been so shocked and were simply fixated on the source of their surprise that for a while, they couldn’t move.

The first one who did was the groom. He’d started crying again, so the bride immediately swooped him away back to the dressing room.

The effect the magivision demonstration had on the guests was massive. We’d told the couple in advance that we would be present in this capacity, but for the influential guests in attendance, it was a preemptive strike they never could have seen coming. In fact, I’d have been worried if the demonstration had had absolutely no effect on them.

All that was left was the cocktail party, so we were past the point of anything that would directly impact the proceedings.

“Good work today.”

While the kitchen staff were busy bringing food out to the garden, our group of Mirko, the production crew, Christo, Crowen, Lynokis, and I gathered in the corner where Prince Hiero praised all our hard work. Gawin and Kakana were also there, but it didn't feel quite right to consider them part of our team. Though to be honest, I was pretty sure we all saw the two of them as our allies by that point.

“Our recording schedule was incredibly tight, but everything's finally winding down. All we have left to do is record the general celebrations and any fun moments.”

Now that we'd made it this far, the recording was practically done. Given the high status of the majority of the guests, we'd deemed it prudent to restrict how much of the proceedings we recorded so as to not leave too detailed a record of the events.

The end was finally in sight.

This job had definitely tired me out. My exhaustion was even more extreme since I'd gone straight into this right after the hellish schedule back in the Liston territories.

“Let's split up for now, then.”

Everyone's tension seemed to dissipate the moment those words were said. Though temporary, everyone had been freed from their seemingly endless work.

Save a few of us, that is.

“This okay?”

“Yep. Know how to use it...? Yeah, like that. It's quite heavy, isn't it?”

“Sure is. Being a cameraman must be tough.”

Since the production crew weren't considered guests, they'd returned to a

side room that had been kindly prepared for them by the Huskitans. It was the same place we had been keeping all our bags and equipment. Right about now, they were probably picking away at the party food and taking naps.

I'd told Lynokis to go with the production crew as well. I didn't want her to be mistaken as part of the Huskitans' staff, as she was in her attendant's uniform rather than formal wear.

Those of us who remained were still gathered in that little corner of the garden, and Christo now operated the camera under Prince Hiero's instruction. He looked less like an imperial prince than he ever had, but there were very few people here who could boldly record the high-society partygoers without arousing suspicion. As such, we'd decided to give Christo the opportunity to experience doing a recording himself. If anyone asked, we'd simply explain it was the man's own wishes.

"If anything goes wrong, just ask Mirko."

"All righty. Happy for your assistance, Mirko. Let's go, Crow. I wanna go record the kids."

"Don't get so excited you trip and fall," Crowen replied.

Christo ran off with the camera, Mirko, Crowen, and the supervising commanders following behind.

The impact of the magivision showing had been both striking and intense. It left an especially deep impression on the children. Adult gatherings were usually boring for kids, so for them, the large MagiPad felt like a cool new toy.

We'd initially intended to pack it away once we were done, but the children—and even some of the adults—had wanted us to leave it there, so we did as they wished. It was currently showing an edited compilation of recordings that Prince Hiero had put together for advertising purposes.

This was all like a tasting where the Vanderouge people could sample both the act of recording, and also being recorded. If we could leave a good impression here, it would serve as a very effective sales pitch. Thankfully, we had the charismatic Christo on our side. I had no doubts he would do well.

"Thanks for all your help, Nia." After everyone had dispersed, it left just me

and Prince Hiero. I still had a task to complete at the party, so I was one of those people who couldn't yet return to the waiting room.

"Nothing to thank me for. It's my job, after all." *And a job worth twenty million krams, at that.*

I wouldn't lie, it had been tough. There was a lot I had to be conscious of, and the schedule had been crazy. But, money aside, I still considered it necessary work.

"Do you deem this a success?" I asked.

"Absolutely." Prince Hiero looked out across the scene of the party where men and women of all ages were chatting and having fun. "It was a success the moment I had the opportunity to show all these ladies and gentlemen magivision directly."

Really now...? Well, yes, actually, I suppose that would be the case.

The recording of the wedding would be the beginning of it all. Trying to gain permission to do that had been an arduous path, but after years of effort, he'd finally been successful. Broadly speaking, his efforts had given the team the opportunity to widen the scope of their projects, bringing us to a wedding where we were able to integrate magivision recordings.

"I'm very grateful that Master Zackford and Mistress Phyledia accepted." They had invited us to their wedding, and they had been the ones who made the final push for their families to accept the recording. Without their assistance, we wouldn't have been able to bring this to life.

"Definitely. I want to make sure I promote magivision to Vanderouge harder than ever so their unexpected efforts don't go to waste."

"I pray everything goes well for you."

As far as activities to promote magivision were concerned, I had been doing my own part, but though I tried and tried and tried, frustratingly, progress was so minor it felt like nothing was changing. If progress was that difficult within Altoire borders, I didn't want to imagine just how hard it was in a foreign country.

“I’ll be praying myself. If seeing all that didn’t move them, didn’t even make them think they wanted a MagiPad for themselves, then honestly, I’d be better off just giving up on Vanderouge. They’d just be a lost cause.”

That was also a valid choice. We didn’t have endless time or resources—knowing when to fall back was also important.

“Excuse me, are you His Royal Highness Prince Hiero?” As we were talking, an older gentleman boasting a magnificent white beard approached.

“Yes, I am Hiero Altoire.” Prince Hiero immediately turned to interact with the stranger, a perfectly princely business smile now on his face.

“I’ve heard of those moving pictures of yours from Zack; I’d love if you could tell me more about them.”

“Yes, of course. Please ask whatever you wish.”

It appeared the effects of the demonstration were already presenting themselves. *“Moving pictures,” huh? I guess that is what they look like to someone who doesn’t know better.*

“Then if you’ll excuse me,” I said, politely taking the opportunity to leave.

“Oh my. My apologies for interrupting your conversation, little lady.”

“No, it is quite all right. I shouldn’t stand in the way of a conversation between adults.” After making my presence known to the elderly man, I left the two to talk.

I do hope things go well for you, Your Highness.

While I was busy deciding what food I’d like to eat, they approached me. Just as we had anticipated, they came.

“It really is! That’s Nia Liston!”

“See, what did I say?! It so is her, right?!”

“It’s the real Nia!”

“Are you serious? *That’s* Nia Liston? She looked way cuter in the pictures.”

Six children who had most certainly seen the advertising compilation in the

entrance hall all surrounded me at once. They all seemed to be in elementary school—some about my age, some a bit older.

“Hey, calm down. At least introduce yourselves,” Christo chided, camera in hand as he ran up with Crowen.

“But Your Highness, didn’t you have the exact same reaction when you met me?” I teased.

“Shhh! You promised not to tell anyone that.”

I certainly didn’t recall making any such promise.

I felt the children’s envy, curiosity, anticipation, and even a little jealousy all aimed at me. Under their sparkling gazes, I gave a bow.

“Pleasure to meet you, ladies and gentlemen. I am Nia Liston.”

We had already predicted that Prince Hiero would immediately be barraged with questions about magivision from the guests. Everyone here was powerful in their own right, and his chance to explain magivision directly to such influential figures had finally arrived.

However, there was the issue of children who were only at the wedding because of their parents. Adults were likely to try to temper their own enthusiasm when faced with something they were interested in; they felt the need to keep up appearances after all. They would often play troublesome mind games just to maintain their image. The same could not be said for the children, however, and their curiosity was liable to get in the way of talks between the adults.

That was where I came in. My job was to handle the children. I could act out things they saw me do on magivision and I even had little tidbits I could tell them about the recording process. I was also equipped to explain magivision in general. If it came down to it, I could even put them to sleep with a little chop on the neck.

Permission had also been granted for us to be recorded with the children. The content Christo was getting right now would most definitely be useful for promoting magivision in Vanderouge. “This is how we record the programs.”

“You can record this kind of thing too.”

We were essentially showcasing what it was like to be on-set. The guests who were watching us record had to have their own thoughts on the matter.

Prince Hiero was doing what he could. I was doing what I could. We would do everything in our power to make magivision succeed.

No one had been able to let their guard down during this Vanderouge wedding ceremony until the very end, but everyone had managed to fulfill their duties to the best of their abilities.

At long last, the sun set over the horizon, and the party came to an end without incident.

Chapter 3: On to the Second Year

“Well then, Your Highness. I hope to see you again soon.”

Early the next morning, Lynokis and I had packed our things and made our way down to the hotel lobby.

“Same here. Next time we share a meal, let’s not have it be work-related.”

The only one to see us off was Prince Hiero, who had been staying in the same hotel. Mirko Tair and the rest of the production crew had been staying at the Huskitan Estate since yesterday; they were editing everything we’d recorded at the wedding. Once they were done there, they’d be heading straight home to Altoire.

Apparently, many of the guests who had wished to further discuss the magivision demonstration had requested an audience with Prince Hiero. He probably wouldn’t be able to go back to Altoire for a while.

“A non-work-related dinner sounds impossible if you ask me. I already can’t imagine us talking about anything else already.”

“Ha ha, that’s true. But hey, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

In all fairness, magivision was about the only thing we had in common, so it was natural that we gravitated toward talking about it.

“Please give my blessings to the happy couple,” I said as we left the hotel.

This had been yet another frantic stay. This was the second time I had been to Vanderouge and yet, never mind sightseeing, I hadn’t even had the chance to simply go out for a walk in town. I had really wanted to take my time wandering around... But spring vacation was coming to an end. The new school semester would soon begin. I had no choice but to return home.

“Young Mistress.” Lynokis suddenly spoke up as we leisurely wandered under the dawn sky down the path to the port. “Since we won’t be back in

Vanderouge for a while, why don't we go eat some crab before we leave?"

"What? You really love crab, don't you?" To think she still had food on the brain when we'd already eaten breakfast at the hotel. Would any places even be open at this hour? Maybe down at the port. Some establishments were likely already open to serve the early morning workers.

Crab *was* delicious. Lynokis appeared to like it, and I'd come to enjoy it as well. Even at yesterday's reception, there had been sandwiches filled with crab cream and they had been scrumptious.

You know what, I'm coming around to the idea. May as well try to find some while we're here. I'd already had breakfast, but I thought I could probably fit a little bit more food in. Perhaps we could even see if they sold to-go boxes of crab we could eat later.

"Should we get some crab as souvenirs for the others?" I asked. "Oh wait, crab doesn't travel very well, does it?"

"No, it doesn't. It's not very suitable as a souvenir."

Made sense. We'd be better off avoiding anything fresh.

"I think we'd be fine getting some small dried fish for Gandolph, medium-sized dried fish for Lynette, and *extra* small dried fish for Anzel and Fressa," Lynokis advised, her familiar frigidity toward her cohort showing through.

I still wasn't sure if I wanted to get them dried fish as a souvenir anyway. It wasn't as if Vanderouge were famous for its seafood in the first place. Its crab was nice, but that had only just started becoming a regular part of their cuisine. It would be a bit of time before it became the food they were famous for.

Anyway, we could wander around and see what we could find at the port.

Just like winter vacation, the moment I returned from my trip to Vanderouge, the next semester began. I was now a second year in elementary school—complete with a newly tailored uniform that had been ordered shortly before spring vacation.

As dramatic as I made things sound, though, things hadn't really changed

from the previous semester. The biggest difference was the location of my dorm room and classrooms. You might say that the previous sixth years graduating or progressing to middle school was a big change, but to be honest, I hadn't been very close with any of the older students, so it didn't affect me very much.

"I guess this is goodbye, Nia..."

"I want to stay with you, Nia..."

There were those who cried when we'd parted for spring vacation, but they only felt more acquainted with me because I was on magivision. For me, they were nothing more than passing acquaintances I occasionally saw in the dorm.

Our difference in emotions had been steep. And yet I'd still made sure to say, "I feel the same." It would have been both pointless and insensitive for me to point out that we weren't actually that close and there was no need to get emotional, so I'd refrained. There were times that the truth could hurt. White lies were kindnesses told precisely because the truth wasn't always the correct thing to say.

"Morning, Nia."

Ah, there was actually one more big change.

"Morning, Relia."

When I exited my room, I spotted Relia coming out of hers.

Yes, now that our dorm rooms had changed, I was now neighbors with Relia. I wasn't sure whether this arrangement was a coincidence or not. Was this a plot by the academy?

"Say, did you hear? We're going to be getting a broadcasting station in the school."

Hmm?

"Weren't we together when we heard about that?" I asked.

Around the end of the third semester, we'd bumped into one of the middle school students who had been acting as the director for the school's production

crew. That was when he'd informed us that such a plan was in the works.

The production crew he was a part of was the one that we had established for the martial arts tournament last year. As it turned out, they were still doing activities on campus.

At first, the crew had simply been a gathering of volunteers. In fact, I was present when they were absolute beginners. It might not even be an exaggeration to say that I had raised them.

Actually...never mind, that *was* an exaggeration.

Nowadays, though, the little crew had been gaining experience by working at the capital's broadcasting station and even accompanying them on shoots. They seemed far more used to the job these days. They weren't professionals yet, but they'd graduated from being complete amateurs. They still had much to learn, but they could at least manage a basic recording. So long as they kept getting experience wherever they could, I was sure they'd improve in no time.

"Yeah, but there's been an update. Apparently, it's been confirmed."

Wow, really?

"The school officially recognized them?"

"Yup. Well, more specifically, they're being referred to as a 'junior broadcasting station.' They won't get any support from the kingdom since they're restricted to recording inside the academy grounds."

But even that much was a big deal.

"That's still a good start. They'd only been a self-proclaimed production crew before, after all."

"Of course. Honestly, them taking on that title at all even after the tournament was surprising enough."

I'd been surprised too. It was during the third semester that I heard they fully considered themselves a volunteer production crew. It was obvious that they were all amateurs in the field.

"Though apparently, this is more than just a title. They're going to start getting funding from the school."

That was great. The equipment and manastones needed for recording weren't cheap.

"And apparently, they want you and me to join them."

"No way." I answered without a second thought.

Could you blame me? We couldn't give such a suggestion the time of day.

"I said the same thing. But apparently Miss Hilde is joining them."

"What? Surely that's impossible too."

All three of us girls were frequently receiving work for magivision, much to our delight. But that also meant we were so busy that there was no way we could also take up assisting the school's broadcasting station.

In my case, I also had the training of my students and the billion krams to think about. If I added anything more to my plate, I'd never keep up—I'd end up slacking on something somewhere. My moments of free time were few and far between. I had my detested homework to consider; I had to keep an eye on Lynokis, who had a habit of wanting to skip her training; and I wanted to do my own spiritual training.

"This feels like something we need to wait for further information on anyway," Reliared said.

She was right. We didn't have to decide our involvement right away.

We walked to class together, chatting all the way under the curious gazes of the newly enrolled first-years.

And then school was finished for the day. We'd only listened to the address from the headmaster and had an orientation for the new year, no classes. I walked back to the dorms with Reliared again, but when we arrived...there was a whole gaggle of people gathered in front of the gates. Since we were still on the school campus, they were all children, but even though ours was a girls' dorm, I could see a lot of male students as well.

"What's going on?" Reliared asked, but unfortunately, I had no idea myself.

"I wonder..."

It didn't take long before we realized what was happening, though.

"Welcome back," Hildetaura immediately greeted us. "Shall we get going?"

In the middle of the gathering of people were the princess and the members of the school's production crew who had just been formally recognized this morning. I was hit by both a sense of déjà vu and an immediate understanding of what was going on.

"Are you doing a campus tour again this year?" Reliared asked, having recognized the situation herself.

"Yes. Is there a reason not to?"

Hildetaura wasn't wrong. Even the messy chaos of last year's tour had been well received. If it was appreciated, why not do it again? Thinking about it further, I suppose to the new students, this could be seen as a celebration of their enrollment. Looking at it that way, it would be good to make this tradition.

This time, we recorded the messy school tour from the perspective of current students welcoming in the new. It had the same chaotic touch as last year's with many children interfering and nothing going according to plan.

That was how my second year at school began.

Some time passed after the semester's start, and the students who had been anxious about suddenly living away from their parents had settled in nicely. My magivision work and my students' improvements were going according to plan. You could even say that the earning of the billion krams was going according to plan. Since I had no choice but to sit out of it for now, we weren't earning massive amounts at once, but it was still gradually building up thanks to my students' work.

I'd also received a response from the king:

"If you are able to earn four hundred million krams by the end of summer, I will deem it possible for the tournament to move forward. The more money you earn the better, but the minute you hit four hundred million, I will begin preparations," his letter said.

The plan was to hold the tournament in the winter of next year, and that meant we had about a year and a half left to prepare. As the king had said, the plan was to spend a year advertising the tournament in order to attract viewers and participants from other countries and make the event as big as possible.

So far, we had saved around two hundred million krams. By the end of winter, we'd already started putting together a hunting schedule for the summer, essentially building a money-earning itinerary.

Even with the incomplete plan we had right now, we were well on track to make much more than four hundred million krams by summer's end. The more money we earned, the bigger the tournament would be, so I thought it wouldn't be such a bad idea to continue earning beyond the billion krams.

Ever since the debut of the paper plays, the Silver Channel had been exploding in popularity. Both the capital and the Liston territories had made their own attempts at paper plays in retaliation, but there was no denying that the programs were inferior to what the Silver territories were producing.

The difference had to be the artistic element. Apparently, the Silvers had formed a team of skilled artists specifically for the paper plays with their second daughter, Rikelvita, at the helm. They knew all the small tricks and how to structure their stories to keep the audience's interest.

Hildetaura had come to the conclusion that it was pointless for us to try and beat the Silvers using the same kinds of historical stories they were already using, and that it might be more effective for us to try attacking from a different angle. I agreed with her reasoning, and so sent a letter detailing the feedback to my parents.

After the Silver Channel, the one with the most growth was the capital of Altoire's. *Cooking Princess* had been pumping out as many episodes as possible ever since the program's inception, and they had definitely succeeded at making it a staple among their viewers.

Signature programs really were powerful. Hildetaura's title as the Surprisingly Approachable Princess meshed well with the concept of the show, and the fact that the program gave the regular citizens an opportunity to interact with her

directly increased its positive reception—especially among the housewives.

For a while, the magivision demographic had been stagnant, but now, more varied audiences were beginning to get sucked in.

As embarrassing as it was to admit, there wasn't much growth for the Liston Channel. The viewers were already starting to get tired of our so-called "winning program" where I raced dogs; everyone already knew the outcome of each episode.

It was about time we added some twist to our existing programs or finally let loose any new innovative ideas the staff had, but the problem was that we didn't have any ideas to begin with.

I suggested that they let me run away from dangerous predators instead to spice things up a little, but it was immediately rejected. They were adamant that they wouldn't let me do anything that would put my life in danger, but I would've been perfectly fine.

Occupation Observation was in a predicament where we'd already visited all of the major businesses... What options did we have left to us?

In the middle of those worrying days, Reliared came with a piece of news.

"Wow, so they finally have their own building?"

At long last, the school's production crew had their very own broadcasting station on campus grounds. Before now, they'd been borrowing empty classrooms to store their equipment and hold meetings, but with this, they wouldn't have to struggle with space for either.

"Yup. They've even already been attracting new members."

I had been in the middle of overseeing Lynokis and Lynette's training when Reliared had dropped by for some tea and a chat. It was the worst timing, but I couldn't be rude to her. At the very least, the attendant pair were still able to continue their training in the private servant's chambers. It was probably tight and cramped in there, but they'd just need to hold on for a little longer.

"Remember when people used to ask us how they could appear on

magivision? It's people like that who have joined."

Aha, so it's the ones that want to appear on magivision. I certainly did remember being asked that.

"In other words, we might see an increase in magivision stars," I said.

If they became popular enough, would the capital's broadcasting station take any of them in? Maybe things would get easier if the Liston territories could nab some promising talent to take up some of my roles...

"We're in danger."

Wh-What...? I had been taking it so positively, and yet Reliared looked deadly serious. Her eyes were awfully resolved for a child.

"There is new young budding talent that might surpass us and steal our popularity. How could you not view them as threats?"

Pot, meet kettle. The girl wasn't even a teenager yet. Plus, she hadn't even been involved in the industry for very long.

"It's not exactly something we can stop, though." The martial arts world was the same. You often heard stories of some beginner whose strength suddenly shot up despite having barely trained in comparison to everyone else. There were a lot of people out there who were just that fast at absorbing new information.

It was important to keep a sense of healthy competition, but in the end, your greatest enemy was always yourself. Becoming too obsessed with beating other people and forgetting to face yourself was how people strayed from not just the martial path, but the path of humanity. It was when you felt most panicked that you had to stop and take a good, hard look at yourself. Calm down, carefully understand what it was you had to do, and then—

"We have to show them what's what," Reliared declared. "The magivision world isn't so kind. We have to go and make that clear to them."

Well...I suppose you did run into people like this. What would an industry like this be without the unpleasant seniors who tried to get in the way of the talented newcomers?

“As such, we should go visit them!”

Huh? Oh, I guess this conclusion was pretty obvious.

“Do I really have to go as well? I’m busy, you know.” I happened to not have any recordings today, but it was precisely because it was one of those precious free days that I had things I needed to do. In fact, I’d been training my disciples before she’d intruded. I had intended to check on Gandolph after this too.

“It’s not like I’m free either, but we have to at least make our greetings, don’t we?”

“Greetings,” she says.

“If it was just to give our greetings, then I would agree. But these ‘greetings’ of yours aren’t really greetings at all, are they?” It was like going to meet someone but then greeting them with a punch to the face instead. She clearly just wanted the new students to know their place.

I didn’t hate the idea, really. If this had been related to martial arts or some sort of violence, then I would have happily gone along with it. Those were the situations where getting in the first hit was important. Let your opponent know not to underestimate you. Let them know that if they let their guard down in a world like this, they’d get hurt. As the one with more experience, it was important to impart such knowledge.

But...that wasn’t quite what Reliared meant, was it?

“We’re not joining them, but if Miss Hilde asks us to help, we’re not going to refuse her, are we? In that case, we need to at least make introductions or it’ll just be a hassle later,” Reliared argued.

“Listen, I’m not saying we shouldn’t introduce ourselves. What I’m trying to say is that what you’re wanting to tell them is the—”

“So it’s decided, then! We’re going to go and greet them! I’ll let Miss Hilde know we’ll be going to see them tomorrow!”

Reliared left the moment she’d said all she wanted to say.

I understood what the girl was getting at, and as I said, I wasn’t against going to give our greetings, and making sure we made our introductions was also

important.

But I needed to make sure she didn't go overboard.

I had no recording the following day, but I still had plans—I was going to meet with Julian and Lucida, the Twin Ice Princes of the Ice Rose Theater Company, and Sharro, their new star actress. It wasn't for any particular reason, we just realized we hadn't met in a while, so they invited me out for tea.

If I had time after that, I wanted to go check on my students, but then Reliared cut right in with her frantic need to visit the school's production crew, so there would be no chance for me to go to the bar.

Going to introduce ourselves to the school's broadcasting station and then meeting with the members of the Ice Rose were my plans for the day; I had my curfew to think about, so I couldn't add a visit to the bar on top of that.

"I'll be waiting for you in front of the school gates, Young Mistress."

"Okay. I'll see you later."

After momentarily returning to the dorm to drop off my school bag, I arranged with Lynokis to meet up with her later and then left the room. Once I'd made my greetings to the new members, I would head straight to the café where the Ice Rose crew were waiting.

"Let's get going, Nia." Reliared was already waiting for me out in the corridor. Since our rooms had been moved right next to each other for our second year, I'd been spending far more time with her than before.

Reliared had informed the production crew of our visit in advance, so all of the members should've been waiting for us. Our surface reason for going to see them was to introduce ourselves to the newly established broadcasting station, but in reality, we were going to check out the new members. We were already well acquainted with the old members, so there was naturally no need to introduce ourselves to them. Hildetaura would be participating in the club as well, so we would probably get to see her there.

"Where did they build the broadcasting station?" I asked.

“I think they said it was near the Satomi dojo.”

Well, that was a familiar name.

“Oh, so near that place my brother is obsessed with.” Sanowil Badr, a boy who frequently asked me to spar, also trained there.

Altoire Academy had many swordsmanship and martial arts dojos with the Heavenstriker style that Gandolph taught being one of them. Taking those dojos down would have been easier than breaking a crab’s shell to get at its meat, so I wasn’t all that interested in them, but I was familiar with Satomi Swift Swordsmanship since it was what Neal and Sanowil were trained in—though mine was a very surface-level understanding, admittedly.

“Oh, Young Master Neal... I haven’t had the chance to see him in so long.”

Honestly, neither had I. I hadn’t seen him once since the new semester started. Lynette would often tell me stories as his personal attendant, so it never felt like we were that far apart. I imagined Neal was also hearing stories about me from her as well, so maybe he felt the same way.

“Hey, what if we went and took a little peek?” Reliared asked.

“And leave Hilde waiting?”

Leaving the production crew waiting was one thing, but leaving *Hildetaura* waiting? She might have been young, but she was still a princess. We were honestly a little too deep at this point to be caring about something like that, but she *was* a princess. Plus, I had my own plans after all of this.

“Just a little peek! Just a teeny tiny one! The teeniest one ever!”

I reluctantly acquiesced. I felt like I was being begged by my granddaughter, so it was hard to refuse. I hadn’t seen Neal in a while, so I thought there’d be no harm in going to see him again.

“Okay, but let’s be quick about it.”

If the dojo was supposedly near the new broadcasting station, then just a little peek shouldn’t delay us too much.

We took a peek as planned, but as it turned out, neither Neal nor Sanowil had

arrived yet. We couldn't do anything about that, so we decided to head straight to the broadcasting station.

"H-Huh?! You're leaving already?! I'm sure they'll arrive any moment now!" the older student who had kindly welcomed us frantically called out.

The other members of the dojo were also watching us with excited gazes. It had been a little awkward for me to say it myself, but I could only assume they were shell-shocked by seeing two faces of magivision in their dojo at once. After all, Reliared and I were both famous by now. Who wouldn't panic if we suddenly appeared out of nowhere?

Let's just pretend that's all it is. There might be different reasons, but I'd rather not consider them.

"Sorry, but I'm not allowed to sign anything without my manager's approval." Reliared looked delightfully apologetic as she refused the autographs that no one was asking for on her way out of the dojo. I followed after her.

"Your manager?"

"My personal attendant. She's also acting as my manager," Reliared explained.

A manager, hm? I suppose Lynokis was a little like my manager. Hell, she *was* in charge of my daily schedule.

As Reliared had said, the school's new broadcasting station really was right next to the dojo. The small brand-new door was already open, and when we looked inside, we saw the previously self-proclaimed—now officially recognized—academy production company.

In the middle of the room was a large round table that could fit a little over ten people. About half of the seats were filled, one of them taken by Hildetaura.

The one to notice us first was the middle school boy who was acting as their director. "Ah, Relia! Nia! Come on in!"

No point dragging our feet. Let's introduce ourselves and get out of here. The moment we sat down, the students who had been doing work around the room stopped what they were doing and came to join us at the table. They must have

been waiting for us.

“Welcome to the Altoire Academy Junior Broadcasting Station.”

Right, I forgot they were officially considered a *junior* crew. Did the school want to make sure it was clear that they weren’t associated with the royal station?

After the director’s welcome, I looked around at the familiar faces, landing on three *unfamiliar* faces standing to the side. *I see now*. The ones sitting at the table were the old members while the new faces were being made to stand.

There was a blonde girl who looked quite confident, a girl with a dazzling...no, a *blinding* enthusiastic smile, and a boy with piercings and a disheveled uniform who looked just as confident as the first girl.

“They’re all in middle school,” Reliared observed. I hadn’t noticed until she pointed it out. This junior broadcasting station was made up of only middle and high school students. They must have decided against letting elementary school children join. It seemed like an inevitable move to me; there was quite a lot of heavy lifting involved, so it could take a lot of strength and stamina.

“Allow me to introduce them. From the left, we have Josecotte Coiz, Kikirira Amon, and Char Gaul.”

The blonde girl was Josecotte, the smiley one was Kikirira, and the boy was Char... Well, they’d certainly added some quirky members to their ranks.

“Oh, me! Me, me, me, me! Pick me!” Even though I’d only been given their names, Kikirira was already excitedly raising her hand. She was asking to speak. Numerous times, in fact. I should’ve expected such a pushy personality would come with that strong smile.

“Go ahead,” the director said, looking a little reluctant.

And then the girl looked right at me as she said, “I’m faster than you for sure, Nia! Let’s go record a race!”

I’m already certain—I’m not gonna get along with this girl.

“Come on, don’t stop there! What happened after that?” Sharro asked,

excitedly leaning forward.

Hated to disappoint, but...

“Nothing. That’s why I’m here now.”

“Whaaat? That’s so boring...” And then she retreated like a wave.

Personally, the boring outcome was perfect for me. I’d been getting all of my own excitement out through the magivision recordings, so she could watch those if she wanted to see me pumped up. I wanted the chance to relax when I wasn’t in front of the camera; I didn’t like to force myself to be interesting or witty when I wasn’t in the mood for it.

Was I even saying interesting or witty things in the first place?

In any case, we were in a café in the capital. It was a trendy little place with booths (despite its size) and on the higher end as far as cafés were concerned, making it a perfect place for aristocrats or famous people to come enjoy a meal in private.

I had become decently famous myself, but the real stars here were the actors of the Ice Rose. The beautiful Lordheart twins, Julian and Lucida, and their rising star, Sharro White, were with me. All three of them had a crowd of especially passionate fans that would cause a ruckus if the stars were spotted in public. And then there was me. I also had passionate fans who... *Well, let’s not linger on that.*

That was why we had chosen a location where we could have a more private space like this. As a nice bonus, the tea was delicious.

“But it seems like you do have more to say.” Julian was sharp.

“Nothing worth bringing too much attention to. We really did just stop by to say hello. But...do you really want to prolong this conversation? You don’t *really* want to talk about this, do you?”

Julian shrugged. “You’d be surprised. I’d much rather talk about something unrelated to my work.”

That *was* surprising. Or...maybe it wasn’t.

“Is this your first break in a while as well?”

“Mm-hmm. We don’t have long before we start rehearsals for our next play, so this is the only chance we have to relax.”

I understood that feeling well. When rehearsals were ongoing, it was impossible to truly relax. Whether on a break or trying to sleep, you couldn’t think about anything but the play and your lines.

After the play I performed in with them, *The Girl Who Fell in Love*, they’d actually sent a few more job offers my way. But Bendelio had said that the rehearsals and performances would be too much of a time commitment, so we couldn’t accept them. The production company had decided it would be a much more efficient use of my time to record multiple programs versus a single stage show.

He did at least give me the choice, but I had no strong desire to become a stage actress, so I left my work schedule to him. Nowadays, that was a choice I regretted.

“I’m not as hungry for gossip as Sharro, but I’m admittedly a little curious myself,” Lucida said. “From what you said, those three new faces sound pretty unique. It would’ve been interesting enough if only one of them was a standout, but *three*? That can’t be a coincidence. I’m curious why they were specifically the ones recruited.”

That was a natural thing to be curious about. Even I had thought to myself that the newcomers were quite the quirky bunch. I even wondered what this new production crew was planning—when fellow actors or staff were *too* unique, it could make them a lot harder to work with.

But no, as it turned out, the young director had his own innovative plans and intentions behind his choices.

“I’m faster than you for sure, Nia! Let’s go record a race!” Kikirira’s smile was blinding as she blurted out her challenge, and I could only sit there in stunned silence. It was too sudden; I hadn’t come here intending to record anything, and we were at such an early stage in our relationship that my only question was wondering who the hell she was. It was all far too sudden.

If they were thinking about using her for recordings, I was worried for the

future of the junior production crew. They hadn't gone crazy, had they? Surely this girl would be working behind the scenes? Actually, no... Someone this naturally insistent to be in the spotlight would absolutely want to appear on camera.

"What's wrong, Nia?! You look so tired!"

I wasn't tired, I was just very irritated by the interaction.

"Calm down, Kikirira. You're creeping her out." The strong-willed Josecotte was glaring daggers at Kikirira beside her.

Yes, exactly.

"Wha? But why?"

Kikirira's clueless expression was infuriating. I could feel my anger building.

Char clicked his tongue, clearly as annoyed as I was. "'Cause you've literally just met and you immediately challenged her to a race. At least introduce yourself first." He said exactly what I had wanted to say for me. He looked like some misbehaving delinquent, but he actually appeared to be quite the levelheaded boy.

"Ohhh, of course! Name's Kikirira Amon! I'm twelve years old, and in my first year of middle school! Nice to meet you!"

She's definitely made my annoying list.

"My name is Josecotte Coiz. I'm a second year in middle school. It's a pleasure to meet you." Josecotte introduced herself after Kikirira. Since she'd started, I guess they decided to keep it going.

"Char Gaul. Second year in middle school. To be clear, I'm only working behind the scenes for now."

Someone as striking as him didn't want to be center stage? I was a little curious about what he meant by "for now." Did he think he might change his mind later?

"I did not think I would see you here, Josecotte," Hildetaura remarked.

Though I was already greatly put off by Kikirira, Hildetaura was still watching

the three of them with much interest. Was she acquainted with Josecotte, then?

“An actual princess works in this industry. Surely it is not an issue for someone like me to join as well?”

“Certainly. I do still find it surprising, though.”

“Your Highness knows about my family’s situation, yes?” Josecotte sighed. “I imagine I will be unable to hide it for long, so I will simply explain—I hate people gossiping behind my back, after all. The Coiz family are aristocrats of the sixth class whose standing is near collapse. My grandfather’s generation made a business gamble and failed, plunging them into financial trouble. We’re managing to survive right now thanks to the kindness of the royal family and our extended relatives, but if nothing changes, we’ll likely be defunct in a few years.”

Her words suddenly made me feel much closer to her given the Liston family’s current struggles.

“I may be young, but even I felt like I needed to do something, so I put my heart and soul into figuring out how to enter the world of magivision. Especially...” Josecotte’s gaze turned right to Reliared. “Especially when there’s a family who bought the rights to enter the magivision industry, and in only a few years, brought forth a new innovation in the form of paper plays. Your Silver family paid fees that my family couldn’t imagine, and yet you immediately earned even more money out of it. Personally, I’m *very* interested in you.”

I found myself wanting to cheer Josecotte on. Not only could I relate, but I felt a lot of our circumstances overlapped. I’d been thinking the exact same thing about the Silvers.

“I was going to mention this later, but I may as well say it now,” the director cut in. “I chose these three because they all have something that you three girls don’t.”

That was a bold claim.

“Josecotte is fascinated by stage plays and theater companies, so she knows all about the ones in Altoire. She can also design clothes and has an interest in

makeup.”

Aha, so she wanted to become an actress. I hadn’t considered that we didn’t have anyone like that right now.

“As for Kikirira, she wasn’t lying when she said she was fast. She’s probably the most athletic of her year. So I’m thinking we could use her in something that shows off her physical ability. There’s still not many programs that focus on that kind of thing, right? Of course, I’d love it if we could record a race between you two if you’d be okay with that.”

If they’d just told me that earlier, I could’ve handled Kikirira better. *She’s the athletic type, is she? She should’ve tried a martial art instead. Do you have any interest in treading a blood-drenched path of domination, my girl?*

“Char is someone who I think will come in handy later. Until that time comes, he’ll work behind the scenes.”

“Also, I have a part-time job, so I won’t even be showing up much.”

He had a job at his age? He surprised me again. On the surface, he might have looked like a delinquent, but he really seemed to be honest and hardworking.

“Why did you decide to join, Char?” Hildetaura asked.

“Wingroad...” the boy muttered.

Wingroad? What is that?

“Ahh, I understand.”

“You know what that is, Miss Hilde?”

“Yes. Not anything specific, but I know of its name.”

“I personally think its time is coming. That’s when Char will really shine.”

Something was coming? I had no idea what they were talking about, but it didn’t seem like it had anything to do with me, so it was whatever.

Except I would eventually find that it wasn’t simply “whatever” at all.

Kikirira Amon, Josecotte Coiz, and Char Gaul. With the addition of those three, the academy’s junior broadcasting station would go on to try out

recordings that had never been attempted before.

Among those that they tried, there were many that were pointless, clearly unethical, immoral, at odds with common virtues, unfaithful, far from socially acceptable, or otherwise outside the realm of what companies would be willing to sponsor. Basically, they had a whole slew of ideas that would never be aired on magivision in a country with a class system—but they saw an untapped mine before them, and surely if they worked hard enough they would strike gold. Sometimes they would run aimlessly, other times they would charge ahead. They stumbled over and over, and hit their little toes against the corner of many tables, walking down an even wilder rough road of trial and error than I had imagined they would.

And then one day, a seed that was planted in our initial meeting grew to have a great influence on my life.

With the establishment of the junior broadcasting station, they could begin their own activities. Though Hildetaura, Relia, and I all had our own magivision work to contend with, so we weren't all that involved. Hildetaura was a member, so she apparently still popped her head in here and there, but she hadn't done any recordings with them.

"They're all in middle school, after all." Reliared had wanted to go visit them to let them know who was boss, but when she was faced with a team of students older than her, she decided against it. She especially wanted to avoid picking a fight with Josecotte Coiz as she was a fellow aristocrat. It was a good judgment, if you asked me. One shouldn't make enemies unless it was absolutely necessary.

Because our new dorm rooms were right next to each other, Reliared made it a habit to come to my room before bed each night—during the time I dedicated to the personification of all that was evil in the world after training my students and then going for a bath.

Incidentally, Reliared would always finish *her* homework before coming over. She was a very diligent girl.

"This tea tastes quite unique," I said.

“Apparently, leaves plucked from young fruit are mixed in. It’s supposed to help you relax before bed.”

Plus, she sometimes brought tea leaves with her, so it was hard to refuse. Honestly, it was close enough to bedtime that it wasn’t really at risk of interfering with any of my plans, so that was another reason I’d allowed the habit to form.

“Miss Hilde’s really doing her best,” Reliared noted. As I did my homework, she sat right in front of me watching *Cooking Princess*, and Hildetaura had just made some mysterious dish with the just-as-mysterious name, “Sautéed venison with a special sauce made from seasonal fruits, with a side of the flirtations of early summer.”



It...just looked like regular venison steak, brightly browned in a way that looked delicious.

“Young Mistress.”

Unfortunately, my personal attendant’s supervision was strict. *Ugh, I only looked a little. I really do loathe these numbers...*

“Oh right, it seems they haven’t managed it yet,” Reliared said as I returned to my homework.

Huh?

“Who hasn’t managed what?”

“You know, the junior production crew’s first broadcast.”

Oh, that.

“I’m not keeping up with every last program that’s broadcast, so I don’t really know much about that.” There were still a lot of programs I was forbidden to watch and I was busy anyway, so Reliared had likely seen much more than I had. Lynokis loved magivision, so she should’ve been keeping an eye out for that kind of thing, I would have thought... Which reminded me that she hadn’t mentioned any such broadcast to me, so I suppose that was proof enough.

“They seem to be having trouble with it. I heard Miss Hilde mutter something about not knowing how to bring it up.”

So they were struggling, were they?

“It’s been about a month since we greeted them,” I said.

“A month already? That was fast.”

That was what happened when you were busy every day—time flew by in the blink of an eye. Summer vacation would be here before I knew it at this rate.

If the junior broadcasting station managed to record something the professionals deemed interesting, it would be aired on the capital’s channel. A member of staff would look over what they had produced, and if the recording was approved, it would be broadcast. This industry wasn’t so kind as to broadcast any old slop, but in that whole month since they’d been established,

not a single thing they'd recorded had appeared on magivision.

I couldn't judge how bad the situation was because I had no idea how much they'd actually recorded or what sort of projects they'd been working on. For all I knew, they hadn't even started recording yet. They could have been in the middle of training Kikirira and Josecotte in how to act on-screen. Slow and steady wins the race, after all.

But given Reliared's report of Hildetaura's concern, it could have been that they'd already recorded quite a lot...

"Have you heard what kind of things they've been doing, Relia?"

"I heard they were gonna start with Kikirira as their star, but that's about all I know. I do wonder what they're up to."

They chose *her* as their star? I really could not stand her.

So she's their star. Their star, huh...?

"Young Mistress."

No, seriously, why are you so strict? All I did was stop to think for a second.

Several months passed after that. It was almost summer vacation, and I had almost forgotten we had ever discussed the exploits of the junior broadcasting station.

Then suddenly, Reliared asked me something she rarely did on one of her nightly visits. "Nia, are you free tomorrow?"

"I'm not." I had plans to bring Gandolph with me to put Anzel and Fressa through the wringer. Lynokis told me that the two of them had been getting far too cocky with their hunting. I needed to intervene before one of them came up with the bright idea to tackle an enemy that was far too strong for them.

Gandolph himself asked if he could come watch, so I decided to take him along. I began thinking I should also take the opportunity to teach him a good lesson as well. Just because he happened to be there, of course.

"Oh, you are actually busy... Miss Hilde said it was an emergency, but—"

“Say that first.” I abandoned the annoying numbers in my homework and looked up. “So it’s Hilde that’s calling us, right? Then I need to go.” I wanted to pummel my students, but this was a priority. They would’ve only just come back from their last hunt, so they probably wouldn’t be going out again anytime soon, anyway.

“Hang on, it’s an immediate ‘yes’ if Miss Hilde asks?”

“Of course.” You couldn’t even compare them.

“Huh? Really? Hang on. Why do you treat her so differently? Are you saying an invitation from me would be bad? But it’s fine if it’s Miss Hilde? Why? Um, we...*are* friends, aren’t we?”

Apparently, my words had flustered her.

“I do think we’re friends, yes.”

“Ah, really?! Yeah, of course we are! I come here every day, after all! I’m always making sure you do your homework every night! I’d feel a little bothered if you suddenly said we weren’t friends!”

I already had someone making sure I did my homework, I didn’t need another. Honestly, having someone come over right when I was doing homework every night and sit and watch magivision with Lynokis was a really big pain.

Besides, I was the one who was being bothered here!

But, well, yes, I did think we were friends. *Yup. I think. Only think...? Yeah, yeah, I do think that is the case. Definitely. Yeah. Let’s leave it there.*

“It’s because the nature of your invitations are different. You would be inviting me for something personal, but Hilde’s invitations are always related to magivision. If you look at the big picture, that is particularly relevant to me. And I don’t think you’re irrelevant either.”

“Oh, you had an actual reason.”

But of course. If you looked at it in a different way, Hildetaura being in trouble meant that there was a hiccup in the promotion of magivision. We shared the same destination and interests, and that meant we needed to cooperate

wherever we could.

Making sure everything was running smoothly would ultimately result in my own benefit.

The next day, we met with the members of the junior production crew for the first time in a while. The moment everyone was seated, the director lowered his head before me and Reliared.

“Please help us! No matter what we do, we can’t get any of our recordings approved!”

Just as I was about to ask for more details, Hildetaura supplied some additional context. “They have brought their recordings to the official broadcasting station multiple times, but every time, they fail to get it to broadcast.”

Right, Reliared had mentioned they could get their recording shown on the capital’s channel if they made something good.

They can’t get them approved, huh?

I looked over at the new members who now had a seat at the table. Kikirira’s dazzling smile was no more as she sat there dejected, Josecotte looked clearly unhappy, and Char looked incredibly uninterested.

Hmm. It seemed my turn had arrived after all.

“Hmm...”

I wouldn’t be surprised if I was making the same face as Hildetaura and Reliared. A...*troubled* face was perhaps the correct term.

Just as our expressions were the same, we were likely thinking the same things too. *They would never broadcast this. No wonder it got refused. I can’t think of any positive notes.*

Before we could form a plan, we’d needed to confirm their current situation. We couldn’t give any feedback or lend them a hand if we didn’t know that much, and so we’d had them show us what they’d been recording.

We hovered a MagiPad by the wall so we could all check their work together. The higher the data capacity of the manastone, the more expensive it was, so their recordings were all generally short—I imagine the budget granted to them by the school had a lot to do with that.

And by the time we were done watching, the only noise all three of us could make was a unified, “Hmm...”

“H-How were they? Could I hear your thoughts?” the director asked. He, the other staff, and the new members—well, except for Char, who still looked bored—were all intently looking toward us.

Guess it’s not just the director who wants to know.

“S-So...before I say anything, can I ask if you’d rather have us go easy on you, or do you want us to be brutally honest?” While Hildetaura and I were searching for something to say, Reliared hesitantly spoke up for us.

“We naturally want brutal honesty! We can’t afford to be held up here any—”

“You need to pay attention to the background noise!” Relia *roared* the moment he agreed to her honesty. She roared with absolutely no restraint, as if trying to completely dispel some pent-up negativity. It was kind of satisfying to watch.

“First off, you can barely hear your voices!” she continued, looking to the stars. “Speak louder! Work on your enunciation! You’re outside, you know?! Your voice gets carried away by the wind!”

So she was going for that angle.

“And you, Kikirira! Bouncing all over the place makes it hard to pick up what you’re saying! If you have something to say, then stand still! Stop talking while you move around! Do even a little rehearsal with your cameraman—he can barely keep up with you! Why did you even record yourself endlessly doing exercise?! What was that?! What did you want to convey to the viewer?! Who would even *want* to see that if it was broadcast?!”

The director had said they wanted to do some sort of program that took advantage of Kikirira’s athletic ability, but absolutely no advantage made it to the recording.

“I can tell that you are very knowledgeable, Josecotte.” It was Hildetaura’s turn now. “But if you continue to only talk about very niche topics, your regular viewers will not be able to keep up.”

She was right. I hadn’t understood a word of Josecotte’s little lecture.

“You have to keep your audience in mind *at all times*. The only people who would be able to understand that recording are experts or passionate theater fans. How much of your viewership would fall under that? Not much, I would wager.”

Kikirira’s athletics were too random while Josecotte’s discussion was too specialized. Well, no one ever anticipated that beginners would immediately succeed, so this was natural. Actually, if you took that fact into account, they might have even been performing better than expected. At the very least, they managed to not look nervous while on camera.

“But the director’s the one who told me to do that!”

“Exactly. Kikirira often flailed around excitedly at her own pace, but I really did just do as I was told. He said, and I quote, ‘Tell us what *you* think the appeal of plays are.’ So I did just that.”

It seemed the ones on camera had their own complaints about the matter. It made sense, though—I doubted he turned on the cameras and told them to do whatever they wanted. They had to have been moving based on direction from the director.

The director was clearly flustered by the sudden blame. “B-But! We have to do something different from the capital or the Listons or the Silvers! We’re inferior in literally everything—funds, experience, and skill! Just doing the same thing would never get us on magivision! We can’t win by following in the steps of the professionals!”

That immediately helped me understand his thought process. In other words, they were trying to innovate through their ideas rather than outright skill. I understood that, really, but they had more fundamental issues that needed fixing first.

Reliared and Hildetaura had already said their opinions, so now it was my

turn.

“I was always told to convey what I want to say as clearly as possible since I was often having to talk about and do very specialized tasks on *Occupation Observation*. What kind of thing are you doing? What do you want the audience to take away from it? Speak while keeping this in mind.”

Everything I learned about magivision I learned from Bendelio. Back when I first started to appear on magivision, he stayed with me at every shoot and taught me many lessons. You could say he was my mentor in this industry, however much I also hated him.

“As for Kikirira, I don’t think she should do things alone while she’s still so unknown. If you want to show off your athletic skill, then having someone that the audience can directly compare you to makes it much clearer.”

This was the logic behind the dog program in fact. Simple comparisons were enough to let even a six-year-old understand what they were watching.

“Josecotte, how about you have a discussion with someone rather than a solo talk? You could talk with fellow theater lovers or specialists or perhaps even actors. If you constantly keep in mind how to convey that information to your viewers as simply as possible, your audience will immediately understand where you’re coming from.”

Her knowledge seemed genuine, so it was all down to how she presented it. Kikirira was questionable, but there was surely demand for what Josecotte wished to provide. Once she sorted out how she was going about it, she would instantly become a solid member of the team. Though if she focused solely on theater, the audience would eventually get bored, so they’d also need to consider what would come after that.

Then again, if she wanted to become a stage actress herself in future, maybe she wouldn’t need to change gears. She could stick with her passion.

“And?”

“Hm?”

Reliared seemed to want something more from me, but I had no idea what. I’d already said everything I wanted to say.

“How exactly do we help them fix their recordings?”

“Oh right, that was why we were called here, wasn’t it?”

All we’d done so far was check their progress and state our opinions.

Next was creating a plan of action. In other words, we were finally moving on to the real reason we’d been called here. We settled on a list of questions and ideas to start:

What is the appeal of the junior broadcasting station?

What does the junior team have that the capital, Liston, and Silver teams don’t?

What sorts of recordings can only be done in the academy?

Given they hadn’t built up a reputation, wouldn’t it be impossible to gather interest if recording was limited to their inner circle?

It might be good to prepare a recording to commemorate the founding of the junior broadcasting station, one that was simple and easy to understand by anyone.

The meeting finally became active, opinions being thrown all over the place, continuing all the way into the evening.

Chapter 4: A Summertime Prelude

Three days had passed since the project meeting.

“Gonna be honest, I had zero interest in the meeting at first, but it turned out to be way more interesting than I thought,” Char said. Reliared and I had bumped into him on the way to the junior broadcasting station after school. As our destinations were the same, it was bound to happen eventually.

“You didn’t seem all that interested from the very beginning, though,” Reliared said without hesitation. That initial impression I had of Char still lingered for me as well.

“I still don’t really get what this whole magivision deal is all about or why it’s so great. I’m kinda just doing whatever Wagnes tells me to do.”

Wagnes was the production crew’s director and also the chairman of the junior broadcasting station as a whole. If I recalled correctly, he was in his third year of middle school.

“But now I see there’s projects where you get to help build it up little by little. Knowing that my own opinions have influence makes me way more interested.”

Really now? When I thought about it, I realized I could relate. I also had programs that I was more invested in. In fact, I might have unconsciously been bringing the programs I starred in closer to my preferred vision.

“What direction do we want to take our broadcasting station? What specials can we only record here? Who are we trying to appeal to? Watching professional works while keeping those questions in mind makes it way more fun.”

Oh my.

“Do you not think you’re actually quite suited to this field?” If he found it both interesting and fun, then Char’s personality may be perfect for the industry. Despite his delinquent appearance, deep down he was really quite the diligent boy.

“Maybe.”

This was the moment that the genius magivision producer Char was born!

At least...I'd love to be able to say that was what had just happened here. But hadn't he said he hadn't joined the production crew because of magivision or the broadcasting station, but because of some “Wing” thing? That was between him and the club, though, so I didn't bother commenting on it.

On to the real reason we were here, though.

“It looks like they've put more into this than I thought they would,” I remarked.

“Right. Though this is the bare minimum, really. If they didn't try at least this hard, they'd have no future.”

Reliared was so harsh. But I couldn't say I disagreed. If you didn't bring your all when it really counted, then you would never succeed.

A whole crowd of students were gathered in front of the broadcasting station. They were of all different ages, both boys and girls, but one commonality united them.

“What the hell...? They're already here? Sorry, I'm goin' ahead,” Char said before dashing off.

Summer was approaching and daytime was now longer, but if the number of participants increased, then it would take significantly more time to record. It was a nice day today, so they'd better hurry and get going before the sun set.

“Are you going to take part, Nia?”

“If I took part, none of them would stand a chance. What fun is there in a match where the winner is obvious?”

“Wow, so confident. You go, undefeated racing queen.”

“Racing queen”? I... No comment.

When the students noticed me, I felt their passionate gazes filled with expectations: a desire to challenge me, a desire to *win*. They all knew how fast I could run thanks to the dog program. But I still refused to participate.

Today the star was Kikirira. The purpose of today's event was to record a debut program for the junior production crew.

And the ultimate goal? To officially get themselves on the capital's channel.

We greeted the staff members frantically running about as we entered the station.

"Oh, you're both here!" The director, Wagnes, immediately came forward to welcome us.

"You've got quite the gathering, haven't you?" I said. There were about twenty people outside, including some familiar faces. Sanowil Badr, his rival Gazell Brock, and Reliared's older sister Ririmi (who was now in high school), were all present.

"It went just as you said, Nia. When I used yours and Relia's names, a ton of students suddenly responded to our call."

That was really all it had taken? Then there was value in us coming after all. On the topic, Hildetaura had been unable to come because she already had plans. She had been quite disappointed that she wouldn't be able to attend.

"Let us help. What needs to be done?"

"Oh, thanks. We're busy setting up, but there's so much to do."

No doubt. It was almost summer vacation, so they'd only had about three days to prepare. Most students returned home over the summer, so if they wanted to record anything, they had to do it now. Miss this chance and they'd have no choice but to wait until after.

"Relia, let's go."

"Aww, do we have to? I only came here to watch."

I understood how she felt. I never intended to help out either. But if they ended up failing to record while the sun was out because they couldn't get set up in time, then this whole thing would be a waste of both of our precious time.

Hurrying the moaning Reliared along, we entered the throng of swiftly working students.

“Let’s quickly run through the course! First...” The director pushed his voice as hard as he could, gesturing to each part of the course so that the students with number plates on their shirts could see.

First was a narrow road.

“Cross this beam! If you fall, you’re out! Next...”

He pointed at a hole in the ground about the depth of a stair and filled with muddy water.

“Do a long jump over this hole! If you fall, you won’t just be out, you’ll be all muddy too! After that...”

There was a route made from stakes stuck into the ground like stepping stones. They were of varying heights, so you had to think about where and how you were stepping as you crossed.

“Skillfully leap across here using only the stakes! They aren’t very high in order to prevent injuries, but if even a single part of your body touches the ground, you’re out! Then, you go farther down here...”

Next was a bunch of boxes of various sizes lined up at even intervals.

“Run while jumping over these hurdles and aim for the goal!”

In short, this was an obstacle course.

What unique strengths did the junior broadcasting station have? What kinds of programs could be recorded here and only here?

Easy: their biggest unique feature and strength was that they had a ton of students at their disposal. The martial arts tournament we held last year at the academy was still fresh in my mind; even that had been held for the purposes of Project Magivision, and it resulted in bringing in a whole new audience of the students’ parents and relatives.

The recording we did back then had been received well. It had been a complete success.

In other words, they could use the students. They could use the children.

This being a school, there were many children, and there was a demand from their relatives to be granted the opportunity to see them. If the junior broadcasting station also used the popular concept of audience participation specials—something that was proved successful by the tournament—they could increase interest in magivision among the student body by presenting the possibility that they too could appear on magivision.

Children were perfectly fine to use right now because one day, they would grow up. Once they became adults themselves, there would surely be some who would try to integrate magivision into their lives.

This project in particular called upon the athletic children of the school. I had no doubts in my mind that the members of the broadcasting station had taken these last three days to run around the school trying to persuade people to join. If they spent three whole days building the course and gathering participants, then they were definitely prepared.

And most importantly...

“I’ll do my best!”

This was a program to fully showcase just how impressive Kikirira’s athletic ability really was.

“YEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! I’M THE FASTEST IN THE WORLD!”

I’d heard that yell of victory so many times by now, and every time, I was surprised by the exuberant emotion that it carried.

With only a few days left until summer vacation, the junior broadcasting station successfully acquired the rights to broadcast the obstacle course recording; they managed to acquire their first victory in the industry.

Yes, a victory.

If the official broadcasting station didn’t deem their recording as viable, it wouldn’t be aired—and that meant their projects should be viewed as respectable matches that could end in victory or defeat.

Those matches wouldn’t stop here either. They couldn’t bathe in the glory of

a single win forever. But at least this served as their proper debut, and the sight of Kikirira's roar of victory, tears streaming down her cheeks, would vividly remain in the minds of many.

It wasn't a bad start at all. Whether because competitive programs were more interesting to watch or because everything had been compiled in a clear and concise manner, the episode had already been rebroadcast twice as far as I knew.

The program had the funny moments of people falling off the beam or into the pool of muddy water, and then you saw the valiant figures of the front-runners beautifully clearing the obstacles. I could report that it went down well in the elementary girls' dorm at least. Sanowil's and Gazell's participation definitely helped in that regard.

As if to hammer home the notability of the athletic skill Kikirira was so proud of, we'd seen her yell in victory each time she crossed the finish line.

In any case, though it took a long time, the junior broadcasting station had finally acquired their first victory. They only had more battles to face from here on out.

"Hmph. She thinks she's the fastest in the world when the young mistress is right here? Hah. What a laugh. She's an absolute joke." Lynokis huffed as she muttered to herself. She was always so immature when it came to the words of children.

I had only ended up watching it because it suddenly appeared on the frame, but I still had my homework to finish, so I turned off the MagiPad.

"Ah."

Oh, were you watching that, Lynokis? What a shame.

"Did you pass on my message to Anzel and Fressa?" I asked.

"What? Yes. They said they'd give an answer once they know the exact dates, but they're looking forward to it and will do what they can in order to come along."

Oh, then it seemed like the chances they'd be able to join us were pretty high.

“What about on your end, Young Mistress?”

“Gandolph said he’d definitely come along, and that he’d cry if we left him behind.”

“That man acts way too entitled to you. We should make an example of him by breaking two or three of his bones.”

Maybe he was a *bit* entitled, but he definitely wasn’t as bad as Lynokis. Plus, he actually respected me! He saw his master’s back and respected it! He wasn’t sitting enjoying magivision while his master was in a violent battle with her homework!

“You’re already aware of Lynette’s response,” I said. Lynokis had been with me when I brought it up to Lynette during our training, so she’d heard the answer herself.

I hadn’t been expecting anything different, though. She’d apologized and said she couldn’t and didn’t want to leave Neal’s side.

“So insolent for daring to refuse the young mistress’s invitation. We should make an example of her by breaking two or three of her bones.”

Too entitled if they accepted my invitation, insolent if they rejected—same old Lynokis.

“Anyway, at least we now know that most of us will be going. All that’s left is to make up an itinerary.”

I just need to hope I can squeeze a week of holiday time off... My work schedule was bound to become a terrifying behemoth again, but it was important I wrung out as much time as possible. Bendelio was very proficient at making up my schedules, after all. One day, I’d definitely beat him up.

“Also, Cedony Trading said that they could arrange the high-speed liner for us. They just requested we tell them the dates as early as possible,” Lynokis added.

“Good work.” Getting our hands on that was a big time-saver.

This time, I would be bringing my students with me on a hunt.

Our summer expedition was almost here.

“Did you see it?”

And of course.

“At least knock, would you?”

At some point, Reliared had stopped knocking when she came around for her nightly visits. That was unacceptable. Though she was still a child, she was the daughter of an aristocrat family. Such action was lacking in the manners and modesty expected of one of her status.

“But you always open the door for me.”

Well, perhaps some of the fault lay with Lynokis for acting so fast she’d open the door the moment she sensed Reliared outside.

“Anyway, who cares about that. Did you see it? They rebroadcast the recording again.”

She was probably talking about the obstacle course.

“I caught a bit of the end.”

Sitting down at the table as if she owned the place, Reliared turned the MagiPad back on. By now I’d gotten used to this nightly occurrence. I needed to leave her to her own devices and beat up this rude homework of mine.

“It’s a good recording. Getting involved from the planning stage really makes you more invested.”

I agreed. It had been a while since I last had any say in a project.

Though I’d been a little troubled by the state of the junior production crew for a time, things managed to end smoothly. Their battle had reached a checkpoint now that they had acquired the rights to air one of their recordings. I knew I might be called on again if they were really struggling, but since I wasn’t officially part of their group, I thought it best that I not get too involved with their work.

More important for me was the case of the billion krams. The fast-approaching summer vacation would be where *my* battle began.

The king had stated that four hundred million was enough, so we would aim for that first. We'd earned around two hundred million already, so with just another two hundred million more, we'd be able to finalize holding a large-scale tournament in the country.

He'd also said that the more money we raised, the better, so we would do just that. It would be for the best if we had a whole one billion krams, so I was willing to keep putting my all into this. Such a large tournament would be practically a festival—the bigger the better, no? It would make things much more exciting for the attendees as well.

I'd decided to bring my students along on our expedition this time. Things would be easier with more people, and working as a strong group made it more believable to acquire so much money as opposed to when we were just the strange pair that was Leeno the adventurer and her protégé.

This summer would be our battlefield. We were preparing a pretty crazy hunting plan for the trip. If we succeeded, we could easily make over five hundred million krams. That amount made absolutely no sense for Leeno alone to earn—it was a little much to put on her shoulders—so we wanted to make clear to the public that we were moving as a party this time.

It was also difficult to find time to watch over anyone's training other than Lynokis, so this would double up as a good training camp. It was time to see just how much they'd grown over these past few months in a real battle.

Finally, summer vacation rolled around. This year, yet again, many of the students were let out into the wild with a mountain of homework as a nice souvenir.

Before we left the capital, I attended the junior broadcasting station's celebration for their first successful broadcast, went to visit Cedony Trading as Nia Liston for the first time in a while, debated whether or not to go to Hildetaura's special *Cooking Princess* recording at the fishing village, received an invitation to the Silver Estate from Reliared—who *begged* me to bring Neal because Rikelvita wanted to see him again too... In those few remaining days, I managed to carry out all those tasks before summer vacation began.

Not that the first half of the vacation would be any different to last year's—I would rush back to the Liston territories and endure a hellishly overcrowded schedule of recording until I earned my freedom in the second half. At that point, my long-awaited expedition would begin.

“Let's go, Nia.”

I met up with Neal and Lynette outside the school gates; we'd be returning home on my brother's airship.

It wasn't like we'd intended to make it a habit, but every time I rode back home on my brother's airship, I ended up observing his swordsmanship training to get an idea of how much he'd improved since I'd last seen him.

This time was naturally no exception, but...

What...? The moment Neal began his spar with Lynette, something felt off. It didn't take long for me to realize why. You *did this, didn't you, Lynette? I see. Very interesting.*

“Is...something wrong?” Lynette tentatively asked.

“Nope. Nothing at all. There's nothing wrong, but is there anything you want to say to me?”

“Something to say...?”

“Is there? No? Surely there is. Surely there's something that you want to tell me.”

“Oh, it appears Young Master Neal is ready to start again. I will talk to you after.”

Oh my. Well then.

Once my brother had gotten his breath back after being beaten down by Lynette, they restarted their training.

Lynokis whispered in my ear. “Young Mistress, is the young master...?”

I nodded. “Yes. He's using it.”

It hadn't been too long since I'd last seen Neal's swordsmanship, but he'd

improved at such a rate that I was amazed—and there was something else that amazed me even more.

The way my brother was moving? He moved exactly like someone who was using chi—and Lynette had to have been the one who taught him. She had taken what I taught her and passed it on to Neal.

Chi was powerful. Techniques which utilized that energy could have unfathomable destructive power, and as such, they could often be lethally dangerous. Honestly, it wasn't an ability that should be taught to those who were still developing mentally or could be evil at their root.

Children fell under those who were still developing. What Lynette had done wasn't something I could let her get away with, but there were two more things that had caught my attention.

First, the fact that Lynette had managed to teach someone how to utilize chi even though she hadn't perfected her own control of it. Even understanding the basic concept and the logic behind it shouldn't necessarily be enough to pass the knowledge on. It may be the case that she was actually a really good teacher.

Second was Neal's talent with the sword. His movements were much too fast for a child, and his strikes were so strong and sharp that there was no way he wasn't using chi. As to be expected from his age, it was an incredibly unstable and unskilled use of chi, but that didn't mean I wasn't impressed that he had been able to practice and understand chi manipulation at even a basic level while so young. Chi wasn't something that a child could so easily learn.

And yet, he was the successor of the Liston family. What a shame. If he were to continue on the path of martial arts, he may have surpassed even me one day.

However, there was someone I needed to talk to more urgently than my brother.

"Lynokis. Tell Lynette once she finishes here to see me in my room. I'm going on ahead."

"What? Uh, of course, Young Mistress."

I had to make sure I gave Lynette a thorough lecture. It was practically taboo for an inexperienced martial artist with half-baked skill and technique to teach an inexperienced student—it was an unforgivable act. However, a student's faults were just as much the responsibility of the teacher. Now that this had happened, I had to make her take responsibility for it.

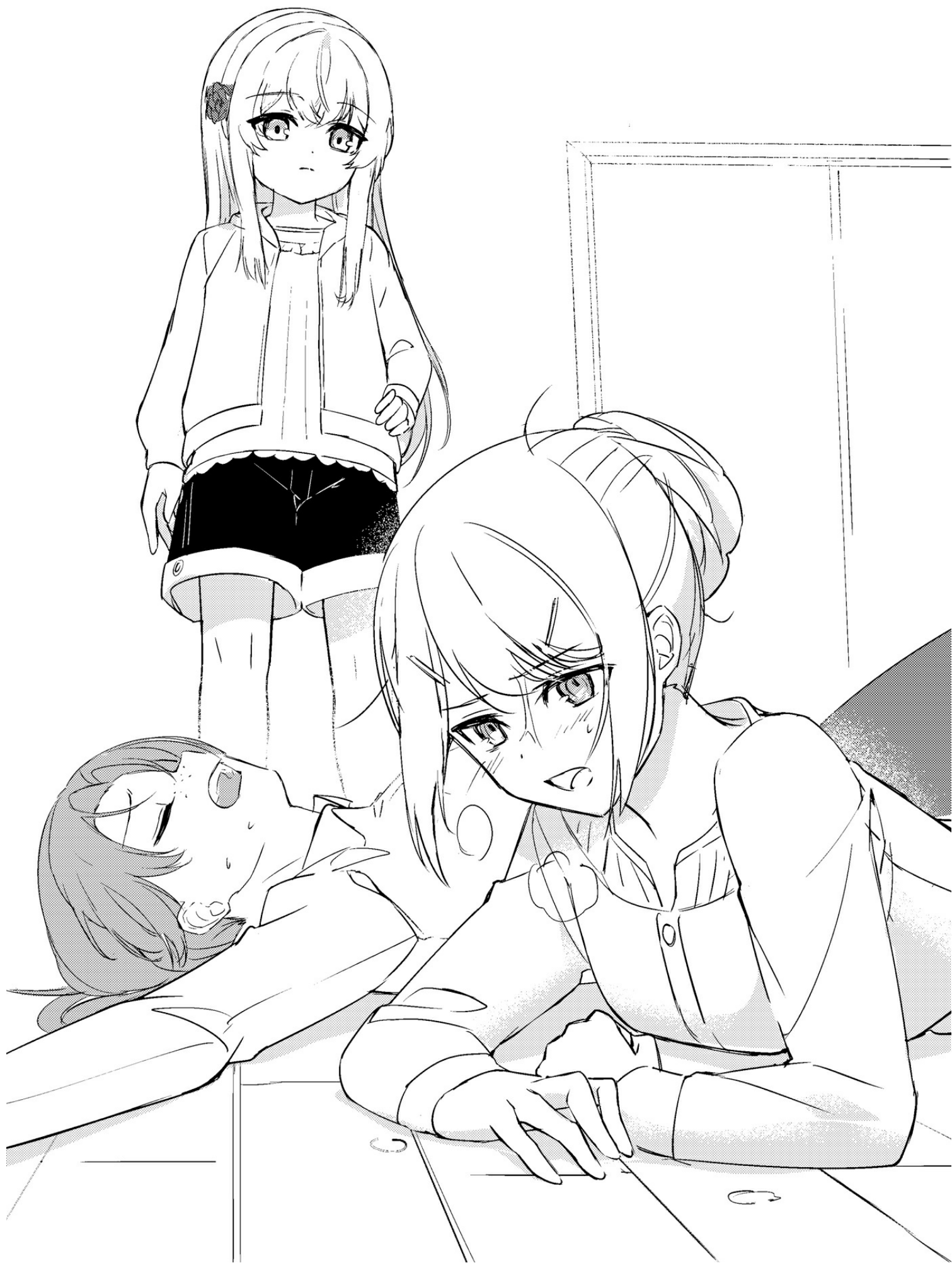
Letting her go with a simple slap on the wrist could have dangerous consequences. In which case, I had to absolutely make sure she gained a solid grasp of chi so that she could effectively teach my brother.

“Young Mistress... I'm...so sorry for...my carelessness...”

I forced Lynette through several drills. I carefully, painstakingly taught her a lesson, lecturing her the whole way. She was now collapsed on the floor covered in sweat, tears, and some other bodily fluids.

“Why did...I have to...do it too...?”

Since she was there, I put Lynokis through the drills as well. She was also covered in sweat, tears, and whatever other bodily fluids. I made them take joint responsibility for the matter.



“If you’re still so weak that you can’t handle this level of training, then you’re ten years too early to be teaching another. If you understand, get going.”

After watching my unsightly students drag themselves out of the room, I returned to my own training; those drills hadn’t been enough to work through all of my energy.

What a disgrace. I’d much rather they made mistakes that were easy to laugh off. Neal was a mature and smart boy, so I doubted he would grow to be misled by his power, but giving such strength to someone who was still mentally young was like giving a child who still hadn’t developed morals a knife. Adults were already bad enough when it came to acting impulsively, never mind putting it in the hands of someone so young.

I prayed he wouldn’t end up on the wrong path when he was older.

“Nia?”

Just as I was training in maintaining my chi at as high a level my body could take, there was a knock on the door and my brother’s voice calling my name. After dispersing the chi that would have let me annihilate an airship in a single punch, I called out. “Come in.” For the record, if I’d fired that shot in my current state, the only thing that would have been breaking was my body.

“Is Lynette still here?” Neal asked, peeking his head through the door with his hair still wet. It was a cute little gesture.

“No, she’s already left.”

“Oh... So, why are you all sweaty?”

“I was in the middle of training, same as you.” I’d wanted to go for a bit longer, actually, but it was fine. This was a good stopping point, anyway.

Neal must have gone for a bath, but I was yet to get the chance.

“I wanted to chat with you for a minute, but I see that maybe I should wait until later.”

“If you’re in no rush, then yes please. I’ll go wash up first.”

“Sure. I’ll wait here, then.”

Wonder what he wants to talk about.

I very dramatically burst into the girls' bath after my students, so they both let out some very real screams when suddenly faced with the one who had just thoroughly throttled them, but I ignored them and quickly washed myself.

The girls had used so much of their energy that they were just limply floating. Hopefully they didn't pass out.

"Sorry for the wait." When I returned to my room while giving my hair a light dry with a towel, Neal was waiting there with some tea.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to rush you."

"It's fine. If our previous long vacations were any sign, we almost definitely won't get the time to sit and chat once we're back home." My break would be so full of recording that the only reason I would be returning home would be to sleep. It was so strange to be living in the same house and yet being completely unable to stop and have a decent conversation.

"Thank you," I said as Neal served me some tea. "Now what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Hildetaura told me to ask you for details on something."

Huh?

"Concerning what?"

"I didn't quite understand what she was talking about, but I...think she said something about some fishing village? She didn't really elaborate, but she said she wanted me to take part in whatever it was."

Ah, she was referring to the large-scale event they were putting on for *Cooking Princess* over the summer.

"So, about that..."

While I told the details to my brother whom I hadn't seen much of over the semester, the airship steadily continued to the Liston territories where my schedule from hell awaited.

His stomach was starting to tingle.

“Goodness gracious. I hadn’t imagined her to pull out such a fantastical plan.”

Having heard something so shocking, president of Cedony Trading, Marju Cedony, was slightly pale in the face as his mind tried to sort through the information. Even his trusted partner, Dallon, who was usually always so calm and collected, couldn’t hide the sweat starting to trickle down his face.

It had been a year since that fateful day of near regret, and Marju had thought that it had been long enough that he could finally put it all behind him as a lesson of the past.

But then, that girl had come to the flagship store again. Just a few moments ago, Nia Liston had been right here, in his office. The last time they had met was around the end of the academy’s last summer vacation period. Since then, they’d had indirect correspondences, but never any in-person discussions.

The girl looked like she had grown taller since their last meeting, though since he’d seen her on magivision now and again, it didn’t feel like it had been that long since they’d last been face-to-face.

“Help me earn a billion krams in two years.” It had been about a year since she had said those words that sounded like nothing more than a childish fantasy. Back then, Marju had almost told her to stop with the silly jokes and was ready to send her back out.

But what a mistake that would have been.

He had been about to make a choice he would’ve deeply regretted.

The only reason he trembled now whenever he thought back to that near miss was because that girl had managed to collect over two hundred million krams in a year. He was so endlessly thankful he’d made the right choice.

Cedony Trading was one of the largest businesses in Altoire. However, had Nia Liston been swooped up by a different association, the losses would’ve been unquantifiable. Even industries that seemed entirely unrelated would have no doubt been affected by what she had done, just like a ripple effect.

Just as that near regret had begun to haunt him less, the source of it all had

appeared right in front of him once again.

This time, however, Marju was prepared.

It was through keeping his past mistake in mind that he was able to entertain her with all his power, refusing to skimp out even a little. Naturally, he paid all the money he deemed necessary to make them feel more comfortable...out of his own pocket.

It helped that Nia had arranged in advance to meet with him, so he had been able to prepare with ample time. From the information he had gathered from Leeno and the other people working with Nia Liston, it seemed she was a lover of tea. As such, he had prepared the most high-quality tea leaves he could find.

For the food, he had ordered one of the beautiful cakes designed by third princess Hildetaura that were currently all the rage in the capital right now. It was decorated with rose petals and a light pink cream. Both the tea leaves and the cake had cost him quite a bit of money.

On the day itself, he was so nervous as he waited for Nia Liston to arrive that he felt like he was going on his first date again.

And that meeting led to his discussion with Dallon now.

“Do you think we should find someone to participate in the tournament as well?” Marju asked.

“I believe it would be more profitable for us to invest in it.”

“You’re right... Leeno is most definitely taking part, so it’s unrealistic to think we could win with ordinary methods.”

Yes, this time, he was prepared. There had been absolutely no problem with their hospitality. It turned out the information on Nia Liston’s likes had been correct after all, and she had been overjoyed with the expensive tea, even more so when he told her she could take some of the tea leaves home as a gift. She had also happily eaten the Hildetaura-designed cake, remarking on its popularity. There was nothing but positive feedback for his efforts. Their time hosting her had been a success.

But on the other hand...one could also say that their hospitality was perhaps a

little *too* effective.

“My mouth may run a little as thanks for all you’ve done for us.” After such an ominous preamble, that girl— No, he couldn’t view her as a simple child anymore. Whatever the case, she continued: “There may be a large martial arts tournament held in the country around the end of next year. If there is, I will potentially be investing one billion krams into it.”

She’d spoken about it as if it were nothing but a possibility.

For a long time, Marju had wondered why exactly she’d needed such a large sum of money. Now, at long last, he had his answer.

The reason Nia Liston wanted to raise a billion krams on such a strict time limit was because there was going to be a martial arts tournament at the end of next year. A part of him still couldn’t help but perceive it as a child’s fantasy, but the reality was that she had already raised two hundred million krams. She had also stated that she would be earning a lot of money over the summer, just as she had on her winter expedition to Vanderouge.

In other words, she was serious. If she kept going at this pace, that tournament would no longer be a simple dream. How could he possibly view this as a fantasy at this point?

In which case, there was only one thing a businessman such as himself should do.

The moment Nia Liston left, he immediately began a private business meeting with Dallan.

“First, the royal family must be aware, right?” Marju began.

“Most likely. The reason that girl came to Cedony in the first place was through an introduction from a member of royalty, after all.”

“In that case, what do you think about what Nia Liston let slip in her joy?”

“I do not believe she slipped up nor do I believe she was as carried away as she made herself appear. As for why, well, it was because she must have *wanted* us to find out around this time. In fact, I think it’s more than possible that she deliberately brought it up. She might have come all this way specifically

to talk about that.”

Marju gave a satisfied nod. “If our thoughts are this aligned, then that means the possibility is pretty high. I suspect the royal family are about to make their own move. They’ll probably make a nationwide announcement of the tournament soon. That, or they’ll come speak with us directly.”

“I agree. If there is a member of the royal family involved, that means His Majesty must be aware. Knowing him, he wouldn’t let such a profitable opportunity pass him by. He’ll definitely get involved. Honestly, he’ll probably use his authority to take over the whole plan.”

“But given Princess Hildetaura herself introduced us to Nia Liston, then the royal family must be on her side already. I think it’s possible that this whole thing was actually a suggestion from His Majesty himself.”

“Whatever the case, I think it’s undeniable that the king will make his move. Nia Liston has allowed us to come to this conclusion just before it happens.”

“Heh.”

It had been forty years since Marju had become a merchant. For the past ten or so years, his company had been stable, no dramatic dips or rises in their profits. Such stability meant he no longer found his mental state being greatly affected by sales numbers, and he’d even begun thinking of retirement and who to appoint as his successor.

But that merchant’s spirit that he had long forgotten had been relit with the tingling in his stomach.

“Where should we start, Dallon?”

“If this is going to be a tournament with a whole billion krams invested in its proceedings, then it will likely be on a national level. In that case, we should prepare accommodation for any foreign guests.”

“We’ll need to procure food supplies as well. Start planning new trade routes while we can.”

The two merchants’ eyes glinted with possibility as they became engrossed in discussing the large profits that awaited.

It was a week later when Hyurence Altoire, fourteenth king of the Kingdom of Altoire, called upon Marju Cedony.

Many pieces had begun moving in preparation for the martial arts tournament that would take place a year from now—the merchants, the king, the whole country itself.

Two sides were secretly, but surely, making their moves, and those who were sharp quickly caught on to the increase in such suspicious activity.

By the time summer came to an end, rumors of an upcoming tournament had already made their way all around Altoire.

Nia Liston, entirely unaware of what was going on back in the capital, was simply diligently carrying out her daily work, unsurprised by the hellish schedule that had been prepared for her.

All while looking forward to the expedition that awaited.

Chapter 5: An Expedition Ends with Sky Pirates

After days spent going through the anticipated hell of nonstop recording, I was finally freed from my duties. Honestly, I didn't want to remember even a single moment of it—as such, I simply forgot it all. But I'd never forgive Bendelio; I'd never forget my grudge toward him.

Our summer expedition would involve my students and me riding on the high-speed liner generously prepared by Cedony Trading just as Lynokis and I had back in winter. Naturally, we would be going as Leeno the adventurer and her disciple, Lily.

To my pleasant surprise, it turned out we'd have the airship to ourselves for our entire trip. Not only would the ship greatly expand our possible range of operation, but it also meant that we could push our efficiency to the max.

Thanks to the efforts I'd put in pushing through Bendelio's incredibly tight schedule, I had successfully squeezed out a whole week of free time.

A whole week. How wonderful. I have a whole week to hunt. In other words...I can have a whole violence-filled week! I'm gonna go crazy pummeling all those monsters! Just watch, they'll be the outlet for all of my anger toward Bendelio!

With a mind filled with such enthusiastic anticipation, we met with a member of Cedony Trading at the port of the Liston mainland before the sunrise.

"Oh, you can be so mean, Leeno! You should've told us sooner!"

Wow, his face was practically radiating greed, embodying the sin to the deepest depths of his soul. It was almost beautiful how little he tried to hide it.

Businessmen had a tendency to make vulgar attempts to hide their true thoughts and it made them much less refined. Being this easy to read wasn't exactly refined either, but...Tork's transparency satisfied me greatly. Being greedy wasn't inherently a bad thing, after all.

This man, Tork Cedony, was the son of the current president of Cedony

Trading, and he had followed in his father's footsteps to become a merchant himself. Lynokis—or Leeno, in this case—had met with Tork several times over the course of her adventuring career, but I hadn't seen him since our winter travels in Vanderouge. Both times I met him as Lily, naturally, not Nia Liston.

The source of Tork's avarice was entirely because he'd been told about what I had let "slip" to Marju just before summer vacation. I had visited the Cedony Trading flagship store before returning home to show my gratitude for all they had done for us, and made sure to leak how exactly I intended to use the billion krams they were helping us raise.

I told them we would be investing in a martial arts tournament that would take place at the end of next year. I'd included the billion kram keywords so they could estimate just how large this tournament would be. Those estimations were at the root of Tork's transparently greedy face.

If he hadn't understood the value of such information, then he would have had no right to call himself a businessman. I wasn't sure exactly how much profit he saw in this whole plan, but the intensity of his greed meant that Cedony had to be expecting quite the large sum.

All of this said, at least try to make a slight attempt to hide it. You can't show children a face like that. Such blackhearted desire was unsightly, the pure embodiment of greed. If I were an actual child, I'd be screaming in terror.

"Come aboard now, no need for us to hang around here. Your party is waiting for you. Oh, do watch your step, young miss." After Tork greeted us with his creepily wide smile, he cheerfully led us onboard for our third trip aboard the fish-shaped airship.

"Master!"

"Yo, Lily."

"Long time no see, Lily!"

After leaving Lynokis to discuss the flight plans with Tork and the rest of the crew, I made my way to the mess hall. Waiting for me there was the party Tork had been referring to: Gandolph, Anzel, and Fressa. Strictly speaking, they

weren't quite my disciples, but I supposed the term did apply in the broadest sense.

"Glad to see you all made it. I'd like to emphasize this first, though. While on this trip, I am Lily, the apprentice and assistant of Leeno. I'm at the bottom of the pack here, so please treat me as such. I'll even carry out any small errands you need done."

"I couldn't possibly make you run my errands for me, Master!"

"That is exactly the kind of attitude I'm trying to discourage." I didn't hate Gandolph's simple honesty, but his stubbornness made things a bit difficult in times like this.

"Don't worry, we'll cover it if he slips up," Fressa said. True, with her and Anzel here, things would probably be fine.

"Why are the two of you in suits?" I asked. "Is this your casual wear or something?"

Gandolph was definitely in casual wear, but for some reason, both Anzel and Fressa were wearing black suits. They didn't even look like adventurers—even I had come wearing a dogi.

Actually, Gandolph was pretty out of place too when I thought about it. His clothes were so casual he looked like a regular citizen. I hadn't asked him to come decked out in adventuring gear, but he could at least try to look the part.

"You only think it's weird 'cause you were raised wrong," Anzel said. "People always form their first impressions from your appearance, so I put heavy emphasis on my clothing."

"I have my weapons hidden under this, so I'm actually geared up."

Well...I would be the one doing most of the hunting anyway, so it wasn't a big deal.

We heard the familiar countdown to ignition, and then the airship was bursting off through the air.

"Still, the speed of this thing's somethin' else, huh?"

Despite Anzel's remark, all three of them had gotten the chance to experience

the airship on the way to the Liston territories, so none of them were especially shocked anymore, though apparently it was a very different story at first. I think I was pretty surprised my first time as well.

“You really didn’t have to come,” Lynokis bluntly said, as polite as ever to her fellow students. Now that she had arrived, we all sat around a table.

“There’s a lot we have to discuss before we do anything. First...”

First, I would finally tell them our plans for the billion krams they’d been helping me raise, that it was all money to invest into holding a large martial arts tournament, that this expedition should bring us well over the bare minimum we needed to hold it, and that Lynokis was the one most likely to win.

“Of course, you’re all welcome to enter yourselves. There will be no punishment or consequences if you end up winning. It’ll likely be on a national scale, so the prize money has to be pretty big. If you win, you can keep every last kram. I won’t ask you for any more money.”

That, and one other thing.

“At the moment, Lynokis has the greatest advantage. She’s been training longest, after all. As such, if she wins, we’ll share the prize money with all of you.” This was something I’d decided with Lynokis in advance. I might have been earning a lot of the money myself, but that didn’t change that the one billion was something we’d all raised together, so personally, it was only fair to split the prize money between us. It would prevent any future squabbles.

“I would go as far as to say that it’s only natural for Lynokis to win. If any of you beat her, it would be a massive upset. That’s my prediction, at least. That’s why we’ll split the prize money. All of you are funding the tournament together, after all. You may have complaints. In fact, you may even be disappointed. But if you are, then I want you to take all of those feelings and prove your strength to me. If you’re unhappy, then win.”

Besides, a sudden turnabout was what I really wanted to see.

“What about you, Lily?” Fressa asked. “Are you not entering? You seem like you’d enjoy that sort of thing.”

I shook my head. “What point would there be in that? For what purpose

would I even participate? As we've seen, I have a very easy method to raise money, and I have no interest in becoming a renowned fighter. In fact, I'm already famous in a different field. I don't foresee any interesting fighters taking part. If I want a good match, I'll just go find a strong monster."

Even if there was a participant that caught my eye, I wouldn't fight them under the eyes of a whole crowd. I'd find someplace we wouldn't be disturbed and have an all-out fight to the death.

Even if I was eligible to participate, I still saw no appeal to joining in on the tournament myself. I'd been able to receive quite a lot of information about the lands outside the capital since starting school, and if I'd learned one thing, it was that this generation's martial artists were not very strong at all. I still hadn't found anyone I wanted to fight. Surely there had to be someone out there who could hold their ground against me. Maybe not within the country, but *somewhere* in the world.

It... It wasn't the case that I was currently the world's strongest, surely? I wasn't even at my best. This body still had so much room to grow, I was quite literally still at the level of a child. At my prime I would be an entirely different beast.

Goodness... Being too strong was in and of itself such a puzzling state of affairs.

While we discussed our itinerary and hunting plan, I could barely contain the excitement I felt toward the coming week—a week *for* martial artists *by* martial artists catering to a martial artist and her students.

Now then, I have sooooo much pent-up frustration from all those recordings! I'll make sure to treat you all very, very well!

Why did the fun times always come to an end so quickly? The trip lasted a week, and yet there was already only one day left.

Hunting A-rank monsters, training my disciples, and also getting my own training in—to ensure nothing troublesome interfered with our plans, I had finished my homework in advance. Yes, I made sure to thoroughly demolish

every last piece of my enemy any time we traveled between locations during that hellish work schedule.

Thanks to that, this week was filled with nothing but fun. *Take that, you cursed numbers!*

“We’re goin’ home tomorrow, yeah? Did we ever even relax?”

“I did feel like we were constantly on the move.”

Anzel and Gandolph were off resting at the side, baring their sweaty torsos to the world. As it turned out, the two of them were only a year apart with Anzel the older one; Gandolph was much younger than he looked.

But I knew what they were hiding. I knew that after I went to sleep, they all went for an adults-only nightcap. Even Lynokis went with them. Did they think I wasn’t aware? Though I was jealous and frustrated, there really wasn’t anything *wrong* with them going, so I didn’t punish them for it...

“Heh heh heh... Hee hee hee! Even rough estimates bring our earnings to over five hundred million... Ha ha ha, I can’t stop laughing!” Fressa, also on her break, was cackling hysterically to herself, so blinded by the amount of money we had made this past week that she turned into a crazed maniac.

Wow, so we made it to five hundred million, after all. It met my expectations, at least. We’d formed a plan of action to take down high-value monsters specifically so it would earn us at least that much. Cedony was in charge of all the tedious parts, though, so we still hadn’t gotten an exact quote, but even lowballing their value, we’d have crossed way above four hundred million krams when paired with our current savings.

In other words, the martial arts tournament was no longer a simple possibility—it would happen.

The rest I would leave to the king. With how arrogant he acted, I was sure he would do a good job. I trusted he would plan a bombastic tournament.

“Young Mistress, shall we resume training?”

Hm? Oh. It seemed they’d all recovered their stamina. Lynokis’s enthusiasm was nice to see—it gave value to training her.

“Let’s start, then.”

For the past week, we’d been using a room of the airship’s cargo bay as our training grounds. We’d hunt at various floating islands, find somewhere to stay for the night, then the next day, we’d board the high-speed liner now restocked and emptied of our kills, and train while on the move. Our trip was a constant cycle of hunting, training, hunting, training. Though my insolent students had clearly added drinking onto that!

This had been such a fulfilling week. Though my students had clearly made their nights even more fulfilling!

Those night owl students of mine all seemed excited for the tournament, with Anzel and Gandolph wanting to participate. Fressa said she would like to participate, but since she still had deep ties to the underworld, it would be a bad idea for her to appear so publicly. She did add that she would try and think of a way she could participate, though.

Gandolph was the one who was most eager to participate in all manner of ways. It was unsurprising—a martial arts tournament would be a big stage for a martial artist. Of course he would get pumped up for it.

Anzel’s more muted enthusiasm came from his desire for the prize money. He wanted to build a classier bar than the cheap little back-alley place he had right now. He wanted more variety in the spirits he served too. I approved of his goal. I wanted him to be able to increase his stock—not that I could drink myself yet. Nor would I forget that he went off drinking without me.

Fressa loved money, so she would take any opportunity to make more, especially if it was an easy job. The basic idea of a tournament meant that you could get big money by just taking down ten or so people, so you could view it as a lucrative job, I suppose.

And then there was Lynokis. Everyone else’s growth had been so surprisingly quick that they were practically biting at her tail by now. I’d been looking over Lynokis’s training as much as I could, but I’d struggled to get around to everyone else, so their growth was a sight to behold. There were several times I was genuinely surprised by how far they’d come since I’d seen them last. They

must have all been taking the training pretty seriously.

“I absolutely cannot afford to lose, not as your first pupil,” Lynokis had declared. Her motivation came from her desire to not be shown up by them, it seemed. She also said, “I want to prove my love for you, Young Mistress.” I had no idea what she was on about, so I only gave a small acknowledgment of her words at the time.

She thought she had the right to say that when she was also going off drinking every night with the rest of them! What was the definition of “love” to her?! What kind of love involved leaving your master behind to go out bar hopping in the middle of the night?!

Our training mostly consisted of spars with me. They could do basic chi training without my help, so now that we were spending a whole week together, I wanted to focus on the things they couldn’t do without me.

First up this time was Anzel.

“Okay, you’re doing well.”

Anzel’s...pipework? Was very polished without any unnecessary flourishes. His basic strategy was to swing sharply and concisely with a focus on hitting the opponent. There were no strange, exaggerated swings and he didn’t try to be quirky with his attacks. He thought of nothing but getting a hit in.

There were many flashy and strong Techniques in martial arts, but this style ultimately being the strongest was what made the world so interesting. Bolstered with chi, just getting one strike in would often be enough to end another human. Even if that didn’t end it, the fact you’d managed to get a hit in at all meant it could connect to your next attack.

In Anzel’s case especially, he was used to fighting in such a way that if he was set on taking you down, he would keep striking and striking until you were done for—it was a style that evolved from his experience in brawls. That determined part of him that showed no mercy was wonderful. He was like an overlooked valuable gem I’d happened to find mixed in at a bargain sale. Strength and skill could be trained at any time, but one’s philosophy or mentality—in other words, one’s fighting style—wasn’t something so easily taught. That was the sort of thing that was built up through real battle.

In other words, Anzel had a natural disposition suited for martial arts. Martial artists had to be able to be merciless or there was a good chance they'd lose their life when pitted against someone similarly merciless.

"Couldn't get a single hit in..."

"Only because our basic skill levels are different. Next!"

After I dodged hundreds of his strikes, Anzel was left completely exhausted. His usage of chi was far too lackluster; he'd never hit me if he didn't move faster.

"I will give it my all, Master!"

Next was Gandolph. There wasn't very much I could teach him. He already had experience as a martial artist, so he'd acquired many of the fundamentals I would ordinarily instruct him in. If there was anything I needed to teach him...

"Stop hesitating."

Every time he went to punch me where I stood, he would frequently hold back at the last second. I imagined he felt hesitance at punching a child with full force, but such reservation could come *after* he was stronger than me.

While I would dodge all attacks with Anzel, I would stand and let Gandolph's punches hit me as much as possible. Getting used to the feeling of punching an opponent with a chi Technique wasn't something that could be acquired with simple training. You had to vividly remember what it felt like to punch someone so you would no longer feel any hesitation or confusion at the sensation—this was what I wanted to teach him. *This* is what hitting anyone with chi would feel like. Punching someone with enough power to kill would leave *this* sensation in your fist.

I also wanted him to learn the correct ways to hit the target and also how to control the strength behind his hits. Just using your full power all the time wasn't martial arts; you needed to be capable of using both strong and weak blows. That would also connect to one's strength later.

"Thank you for this opportunity!"

"Sure. All right, next."

Next was Fressa.

“Hope you can give me some pointers, Lily,” she said with a smile—and then she immediately threw needles at me.

Out of all of them, the one who was most fun to fight was this lady here. She was an assassin, used to handling various hidden gadgets.

No matter how defenseless someone may be, wherever their eyes looked would be the direction they were most on guard. But even though she had to attack from head-on, Fressa moved at a speed too fast for her opponent to react and mixed feints with her attacks, making for a very high level of skill.

There were various moments where even I would’ve felt the danger of the situation if this had been the real thing and her blades were tinged with poison. Though technically I could easily cleanse poisons with chi.

“Are you out of weapons? If you are, there’s no way you can win.”

“All I have left are things like toxic gases, the ones that indiscriminately damage.”

Wow, so she’d completely used her stock of secret tools over this past week, then. If she worked on her core strength, I’d think she could make much more efficient use of— *Crap, that was close.*

“Your belt was actually a whip all along, hmm? You almost caught me there.”

Fressa had made me think she was out of tricks and then launched a surprise attack. Unfortunately for her, it had been incredibly easy to read.

“Sparring with you really kills my confidence...”

But why? That attack would’ve worked on most people who weren’t me. Among my students, the one who was most suited for a deathmatch over a friendly one was definitely Fressa.

“Lynokis, you’re up.”

“Yes, Young Mistress.”

When I trained with Lynokis, we left it at a simple spar. I dropped my ability to around her level and we then duked it out. This was how our training always

went. I'd train her through actual combat, and push her, push her, push her some more until something innovative was forced out. That something could be some new idea, or it could be a read, or it could be a new way to counter an opponent's move.

When someone was in a dire situation, they'd sometimes find a new choice they hadn't seen before, but undoubtedly was born from them. Many times, these were the moves that far surpassed what they thought possible from themselves.

Lynokis already had a fairly good foundation built up, but she was definitely lacking in real experience. That was why I was focusing on training that forced her to stubbornly hold on to the end while being pushed into a corner.

I wasn't sure how much of an effect the training would have on each of them, but I hoped they would only continue to grow.

Could even just one of you surpass me someday...?

We'd had no base of operations for this expedition. Generally, we were changing accommodations every day, constantly on the move. In fact, since we were in the airship the vast majority of the time, there were no unexpected meetings or happenings. The most exciting thing that happened was my students sneaking out for a drink at night.

Incidentally, I'd used Prince Hiero's name again as an excuse to travel. I was still only seven, so even if I had a bodyguard in the form of my personal attendant accompanying me, I wasn't of an age that could so easily have independent travel approved. That was why I contacted the prince as I had over the winter and pretended he'd called us out here.

I did at least meet up with him, but it was just once and we didn't hang around for very long.

And with that, our weeklong expedition ended without issue. Everything went well from beginning to end, and we achieved our minimum goal.

Actually, no, that wasn't quite right. Because something *did* happen just as we were about to return home.

“Sky pirates! Sky pirates are here!”

On the evening of our sixth day, we faced a sudden encounter.

Sky pirates, huh?

This seemed like it would make for a fun summer memory indeed.

By evening, we had finished the day’s training, had gotten washed up, and were busy relaxing. After one last day of island hopping and hunting, we were on our way to the floating island we’d be staying at for the night.

But just as we were about to reach our destination, the sky pirates attacked.

“Young Mistress, it’s dangerous, so do remain in your... You know what, never mind.”

With Lynokis having given up, I decided to boldly investigate the intriguing voices from outside. It was rare for her to permit me to do as I wished, so I wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of the opportunity. Having her realize how pointless it was to try and stop me saved a lot of time.

My hair was dyed, so a bit of commotion wouldn’t so easily blow my cover. I *was* Lily right now, not Nia Liston, so even if something happened, we’d be able to come up with some kind of explanation.

Besides, it was entirely true that this situation was truly dangerous—we were talking about sky pirates here. Worst-case scenario, they could shoot down the whole airship. This was a situation that called for full force, no holding back. There was no time to play around. I could survive no matter the outcome, but the same couldn’t be said for everyone else if our vessel was shot down.

Plus, this wasn’t any old airship, it was the latest high-speed liner from Vanderouge; there was no doubt it cost millions, if not billions of krams, to repair. Even if I didn’t have to personally pay for any damages, I couldn’t afford for Cedony to face any losses after they’d done all they could to support us in our mission.

Those reasons aside, I was honestly incredibly excited that I was going to be able to beat people up at full strength for the first time in a while.

“Hmm, okay.”

When Lynokis and I arrived at the helm, my students were already there. The ship’s crew were also on standby awaiting orders. Tork’s and the captain’s faces were grave as they reported the situation.

“In other words, unluckily for us, the sky pirates were lying in wait near the area we started slowing down?” Lynokis asked. The two men nodded.

So we ended up slowing down with the worst timing right into sky pirate territory, and were caught by them while they were lying in wait ready to attack any merchant ships?

This airship was much faster than any other ship currently on the market. Under ordinary circumstances, the pirates would’ve had no chance of catching up to us.

But things were much different when we were landing. This airship could zoom away easily using a turbo blast, but its regular speed outside of that was greatly reduced. It was necessary to slow down a fair distance away from wherever we were landing because the speed and boosts made it too difficult to control. If they didn’t slow down, the ship would either fly right past its destination or collide spectacularly with it.

Naturally, the airship had slowed down to prepare for docking this time too, and that was when we ran into the sky pirates.

“There are three ships, one in front, one on port side, one on starboard. They’ve deliberately entered a formation to prevent us from proceeding.”

“You should be aware of this, Leeno, but this airship isn’t equipped with any weaponry...”

We knew that well because of the fight with the skysquid back in winter. The high-speed liner was built solely for swift flight, so not a single weapon had been installed. That meant that if it was targeted by anyone or anything, its only option was to retreat—and usually, that would be fine. It was fast enough to outrun anything. But it meant there were no options when the way was blocked as it was now. There was no way to make use of their ultimate speed.

“Yo, he just said *three* airships,” Anzel whispered to Fressa.

“Ooh, I’m getting excited. What do you think they’ll do?”

“You two are way too happy about this...” Gandolph grumbled.

I could very clearly hear my students muttering between themselves. *I understand you well, Fressa. I’m excited too.*

“What are their demands?”

“None yet. It seems they’re focusing on solidifying their formation, so we definitely can’t escape first.”

We can make use of this.

“Is their target the ship itself?”

Yup, Lynokis’s deduction was the same as mine. The high-speed liner was still an early model with many issues and areas of improvement, but that also meant that very few of them existed in the world; it was a very rare ship. The ship itself was probably of higher value than all its cargo put together. Plus, the monsters we had just hunted were also currently loaded on the ship, and that all came to around fifteen million krams.

Since the sky pirates were so desperate to get their hands on our ship, the last thing they’d want would be for us to escape—no wonder they were being careful. And if they were being careful, that meant we had time to prepare.

“Usually, we’d negotiate with the sky pirates to determine the portion of our cargo to give them or we’d simply pay the ransom and that would be that. It’s very rare that people are killed or airships shot down unless something unexpected happens, but...” Tork frowned. “But I can’t really tell how this time will go. If I was a pirate, I’d definitely target this ship. I don’t think there’s anything else we can chase them away with.”

That was likely the case. Not only was this a cutting-edge airship that was rarely seen, but they must have also witnessed just how fast the thing could go. It was an airship that would allow them to outrun *anyone*. It was desirable whether you were a pirate or not. Even I wanted one, and it seemed my other students agreed.

“Smart move targetin’ the ship. ’S what I’d do.”

“Same. I super want one. You could definitely sell it for somewhere in the millions.”

“Say...it’s maybe a bit late to be asking this, but why can this lump of metal even fly? Isn’t it weird?”

I related to Gandolph in that moment. Who would ever believe that a lump of metal could fly in the sky?

“What is the plan, then?” Lynokis asked the captain.

“We’re a little unsure. Usually, we would prioritize your safety and pay anything they asked for, but if the *ship* is what they want, then...”

I see the problem now. If the situation could be resolved with money, they’d pay it in a heartbeat. The problem was that it couldn’t. For a trade association as large as Cedony, money wasn’t the problem, it was the potential loss of trust. The owner of this airship wasn’t Cedony Trading, it was someone in Vanderouge. For all I knew, it was owned by the empire itself. Whatever the case, Cedony was only borrowing the ship. The fact they were permitted even that much was a sign of trust—they couldn’t afford to lose it, no matter the circumstances.

In that case, there was only one thing for it.

“Let’s kill them, Master,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Huh?!”

“HUH?!”

It was the first thing I’d said in a while and the reaction in the room was immediate and unanimous. The captain, Tork, my students, the people keeping a lookout, the crew that had naturally gathered here, all of them reacted. Only Fressa let out a happy, impressed whistle.

“I’m sure that right now, those pirates are overjoyed, thinking that luck is on their side. Their delectable prey has wandered right into their trap, after all. They’re ready to swallow us whole. But with Master here, the situation is really

quite the opposite. We should kill those pirates and take every last ship, belonging, and treasure they have. We can even split it between us after. It'll make for a nice bit of bonus income. Really, we're the lucky ones here."

We could take down some bad guys, be praised as heroes, and clean up the skies in the process. Sounded like the perfect plan to me.

"Young Mi— Lily, wait."

"Excuse me? Did you just tell me to wait?" I stared unflinchingly at the hesitating Leeno, my master who should have been the most confident in this situation, our leader. "What are you waiting for? What other option do we have? Our enemies won't wait for us, and we can't cause trouble for Cedony after they've given us so much support. We've not been so casual with our training we'd lose against some simple pirates, right? Why are you hesitating? Or do you want to just lie here and wait? You can if you want. I'll go clean them up for you."

There was a beat of silence.

And then, Lynokis enthusiastically shouted, "Let's do it!"

Yes, yes, that's how you should be. That should be your natural response. The crew, who had been nervously watching the discussion, immediately cheered upon the unexpected declaration of war against the sky pirates. Yes, yes, that is the perfect reaction. No one wants to just sit there and cave to the demands of ruffians. Who would ever accept such an unreasonable outcome?

"Damn, things are heatin' up. She's ready to actually kill them, huh?"

"She's so cool... I think I'm falling for her..."

"Master...!"

It seemed my students were ready to do some killing themselves.

"But, Young Mistress, cleaning up afterward would be quite troublesome, so do your best to leave them alive where you can," Lynokis whispered in my ear. As reluctant as I was, I nodded in acquiescence.

Tch, I suppose I have no choice. Cedony would be in charge of any cleanup and I already said I don't want to bother them further.

Once we decided to fight, we moved into discussing a plan of attack.

First, we'd have several crew members wait on standby near the flight hatch where small skiffs were launched from. Since this airship was fish-shaped, it didn't have a proper deck. There was nowhere else that the sky pirates would be able to dock their skiffs.

It would be a problem if they tried to force their way in and damaged the ship in the process, so we'd open the hatch as they approached and greet them ourselves.

We also wanted to position ourselves there to ready skiffs to raid their airships back. Preparing the skiffs would be the crew's job—ours would come after.

Once we'd decided on a rough plan of action, our group retreated to a different room so we could talk in private. I couldn't ask Lynokis to command them, so I took over. Not that we had time to discuss many more details.

"Since there are three ships, we'll naturally need to split into three groups." We couldn't take down the ships one by one; the moment one of their ships was attacked, the others would come to assist their allies. In which case, the best course of action was to attack them all at once so they couldn't easily fire their cannons. You couldn't exactly stand and aim when you were in the middle of being raided.

"Quite importantly, is anyone here unsure if they can do this? If you aren't confident, then you can stay behind." It was a foolish question to ask of such enthusiastic students, but I wanted to at least check.

Unsurprisingly, no one raised their hand.

"Good. I'll split us into three, then. Though you probably know what I'm about to say."

I would go solo, Lynokis would go with Gandolph, Anzel would go with Fressa. Those were the most obvious pairings.

"But I want to go with you," Lynokis whined.

“Nope, you can’t. This isn’t the time for you to be selfish.”

“You’re right...”

Lynokis quickly fell back when I rejected her. She must’ve known what my reply would be before she even said it. People’s lives were on the line here—it wasn’t time to be accommodating a single person’s selfish desires.

“Let me go over the rough plan again. We’ll attack the three ships at once, but try to get the ship in front under our control as fast as possible. Once that one’s taken over, we’ll raise a signal so that our ship can make its escape.”

The priority here was the safety of the high-speed liner. If we could take over and move the airship in front, it could boost away without having to worry about a collision. Get that out of the way, and we could figure out the rest from there.

“After that, we’ll raise a signal once the rest of the airships are taken over so they’ll know to come back and pick us up. How you take over the ship is up to you, but do your best not to kill the pirates or sink the airship. That about sums it up.”

It would be fine if my students accidentally killed them, so I didn’t forbid it entirely. If they were about to be killed, then they should kill back. If things got too dangerous, they should never hesitate. The lives of some sky pirates weren’t worth more than my students’.

I would try my best not to kill either, but there were times even I wouldn’t be able to help it.

“Also, I don’t think this’ll happen, but if you find yourself at a total disadvantage, dodge for your life and don’t stop. So long as you don’t die, I can do something about it.” I highly doubted they’d lose against mere pirates since they could all control chi to a certain extent, but anything could happen in a real fight. I wanted to make sure all our bases were covered.

“We don’t have much time, so I’ll leave the briefing there. Let’s go.”

We made it back to the flight hatch right as they were about to open it. Once that entrance opened, the sky pirates would board. The captain, crew, and Tork

were all nervous.

I felt bad for them, but I couldn't deny that I was incredibly excited. *What are the pirates gonna be like? Will they be strong? I hope they're strong. Oooh, I can't wait!*

A heavy gust of wind flew in the moment the hatch opened. Riding on that wind, six rusty green skiffs holding two people each flew in, leading to a total of twelve rough-looking men boldly stepping onto our ship.

First thing to do was to assess their gear. They seemed to be using mainly swords and daggers, but they all wore ragged, light clothes. What really caught my attention was the strange little golden tubelike things sheathed in their belts. Were they for firing blowdarts? It looked like the intention was to shoot *something* out of it at least, but I'd never seen that sort of weapon before.

"HAH HAH! I must praise you on your kind welcome!"

While I had been observing them, one more skiff floated on in. Unlike the grunts with their run-down skiffs and their ragged clothes, this man was wearing a long black coat embroidered with luxurious gold thread. Even his skiff was bright gold... But then I took a closer look and saw that the paint was peeling—must've been a cheap job. Leaders had to make sure they distinguished themselves, though, so I wouldn't cast further judgment.

Their captain laughed joyfully as he got down from his ship, walking forward with large, exaggerated claps.

You could see his status at a glance.

I'd had the impression that a captain of sky pirates would be some dirty old man whose face was ninety percent facial hair, but this man was surprisingly young and handsome. He looked to be in his thirties with a well-trimmed mustache and long slicked-back hair.

The exaggerated theatrical gesture of lifting his tricorne hat from his waist and flipping it onto his head with a bow right in front of our own captain was incredibly flamboyant, but it wasn't lacking in grace. It was a little annoying for an *intruder* to be acting that way, though.

The captain's image was entirely different from his crew, but at least it meant

they had a stylish leader.

“We are the great Hammerhead Sky Pirates, striving to be bright and positive raiders of the skies. Good conduct and generosity are our creed.”

The Hammerhead Sky Pirates? I’d never heard of them. Were they famous? If they were, then I could look forward to the reward.

“Moving on...let’s not make this complicated, eh? This ship of yours is real nice, wouldn’tcha say?”

Glad he wasn’t beating around the bush. I much preferred straightforward negotiations.

With this, though, our suspicions were confirmed. I couldn’t blame him for wanting a ship like this. If he didn’t desire it whatsoever, I’d question his status as a sky pirate. Now that we knew why they were here, though, there was no need for us to wait around.

I sent an inconspicuous signal to my students, telling them that I was going to make my move. I alone began to approach, wading through the shadows and tension filling the room. I swiftly made my way toward the open flight hatch while sticking next to the walls. Using the shadows of their parked skiffs, I managed to circle around behind them to confirm the situation.

No one’s spotted me, right? Good.

“What are your demands?”

“C’mon, man, don’t make me spell everything out. Ain’t it obvious?”

The room was silent as the two captains negotiated. I was the only one sneaking. I went around knocking out each of the pirates, one at a time. I approached silently; not a single one of them realized I was there. Like a swallow cutting through water, I knocked each and every one of them unconscious before even the first had fallen to the ground, causing nary a ripple.

Perfect. I stopped after hitting each of my unwitting targets—and then they all collapsed like dominoes.

“O-Oh dearie me, what’s going on here?” With the sounds of collapsing

bodies behind him, the sky pirate captain naturally turned to look.

But the one widening their eyes was me.

So fast.

His move was immediate. I could tell he hadn't actually processed what had happened that quickly. The moment he turned and saw me standing in the middle of his men's collapsed bodies, he unflinchingly made his move. He moved even faster than my students—who had sprung to action the moment his gaze was averted—pulling that gold tube from his waist, and aiming the hole at the tip toward me.

He moved entirely on instinct. There was no conscious thought, no active decision-making, it was purely a conditioned reflex. That was why he was so fast. I couldn't detect his aura; I wasn't given the opportunity to sense his intent to kill.

What wonderful skill. There were likely very few martial artists in the world who could hope to react fast enough to such an attack.

Then suddenly, there was a flash from within the tube.

Bang!

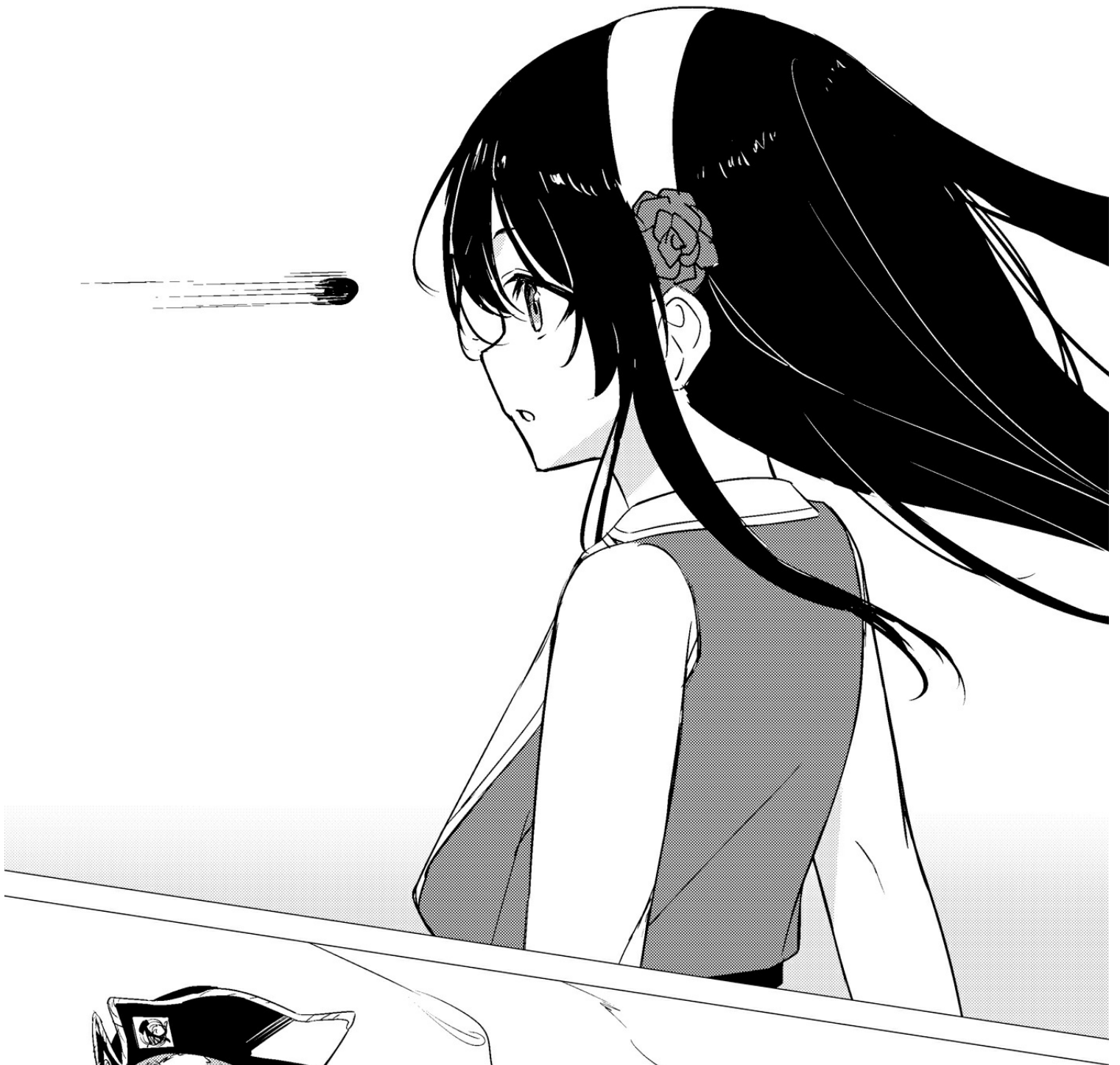
A deep boom roared out and something black came flying toward me so fast I could barely see it.

"Young Mistress!"

"Master!"

"Lily!"

"You bastard!"



Neat.

“Interesting weapon you have there.”

I took the little black object and rolled it around in my hand. *Hmm, is this just a normal metal ball? It's really hot. Do I smell gunpowder? Did he use a blast of gunpowder to shoot this out?*

“That cylinder of yours works like a little cannon, then,” I observed. What a logical weapon. It was a ranged weapon with quite the lethal power that even weak children could handle. It had enough force behind it that it could easily break skin and pierce meat. It might even be able to break bones. You’d die the minute one of those hit a vital spot.

“Wha...? Y-You just...grabbed the bullet...?”

Well, yes, can't you see? Everyone was staring at me blankly, from the captain (who had fired the shot), to my students (who had screamed out to me), to Anzel (who had been about ready to throw a fist right into the shooter), to the rest of the crew.

But it was as they could see.

The weapon was interesting, but it was easy enough to stop when fired at from straight ahead. It also wasn't anywhere near strong enough to pierce my skin. At worst, it would sting a bit. I wouldn't have called it faulty as a weapon, but it definitely had plenty of room for improvement. The speed wasn't bad, but it still wasn't fast enough to catch me off guard.

“Here, you can have it back.”

Thwuk.

“Gwuh?!”

When I flicked the little metal cannonball back, it drove right into the captain's stomach. My finger bullet was both faster and stronger than the one he had fired from his little tube.

After we took down their vanguard force, we quickly moved on to the next step.

We left the job of tying up most of the pirates to our crew while my students and I went with our ship's captain and Tork to drag the sky pirate captain to an empty room—specifically, the room that we had been training in this past week. They'd probably throw the rest of the pirates in here too once they were done. It was a convenient empty space.

"What do you want us to do? Beat him up?" Anzel immediately jumped to the violent suggestion, but the man was already weakened. There was no need to make things worse for him. This whole time, he was just rolling around on the floor in pain. He didn't even look like he was trying to resist.

To be clear, I...definitely aimed for the buckle of his belt so it wouldn't pierce through his body. Did I make the buckle push into his stomach *that* hard?

In any case, we had to move fast so that we could make it onto the enemy ships before they realized we'd taken down their friends. We could leave the shaking down until after we'd dealt with the rest of them.

I sent a glance toward everyone present as a signal to leave it to me and then stepped forward.

"Hey." I crouched down next to the captain—who was still clutching his stomach in pain—and quietly spoke to him. "How many men do you have in your crew? How many ships do you have? Where's your base? I want to make sure I hunt every last one of you down, so I'd love it if you told me."

"Ha... Ha ha... Ha ha ha..." His laughter, as weak as it was, was defiant through the pain. "Do you...really think I'll...tell you...? I wouldn't tell you even if you killed me..."

Surprisingly loyal.

"I'll just kill you all, then. That okay with you?"

"Huh...?"

"We have no reason to keep any of your crew alive. It would be faster for us to just kill you all and throw you out to be food for the fishies down below, and we wouldn't have to worry about you coming after us later either. It wouldn't even be that much hassle. But if you give us the information we're after, your punishment will be lighter. We'll take over your ships with as few casualties as

possible. We have no time, so you need to decide right here, right now. If you don't, we'll kill them all."

I smiled sweetly at the captain, who stared intently back at me.

"Do you think I'm bluffing? Or are you taking me seriously? To be clear, I'd *love* to kill you all, but it's too annoying having to clean up afterward. If you don't believe me, I'll kill one of your men right in front of you."

I wasn't sure what he thought of my threat... Well, it wasn't really a threat. I was being serious. My *warning* might be more accurate.

I wasn't sure, but he immediately turned to the older men on the ship and yelled at them. "H-Hey! What the hell's with this cheeky rascalion of yours?!"

"*Rascalion*"? I was quite old myself, but even I knew how outdated that word was...

"That 'rascalion' is the apprentice of a skilled adventurer. We won't think any less of you if you surrender here. She'll do anything she puts her mind to."

Captain, don't you start using that word too. This wasn't the time to be messing around anyway.

"So what will you do?" I asked. "Give us the information or not?"

"Who's to say you'll actually follow through with your end of the deal, huh?!"

"You'll choose to let everyone die just because you didn't believe me? You're not going to even try to hold on to a shred of hope?"

The choice here should have been easy unless he cared little for his own men.

"No, seriously, who is this rascalion?! She hasn't looked like a kid from the second I laid eyes on her! She's got the eyes of someone who makes deals with people's lives every day!"

I'll kick your ass if you say that again.

After two or three hits, the captain stopped resisting and gave us the information we were after. According to him, each airship usually had a crew of around fifteen people, but since crew members sometimes remained at their

hideout instead of going on missions, the exact numbers changed each time, so he couldn't say for sure.

They would carry out their operations in groups of three ships with the captain at the head, but each ship also had their own helmsman—a vice-captain of sorts—who was the commander for their vessel.

Two of the airships were of an average size, but the captain's was a little bigger—that was the one blocking our escape route.

Apparently, the twelve crew members that had raided us hadn't all come from one ship—that meant about four from each if they had come in equal number. That left about ten pirates on each airship.

And that was about all the information we could get. I asked a little about their base, but that was information we could clarify later. For now, we needed to take down their airships before they started firing their cannons.

We'd gotten all the information we needed, which meant we were done with the captain, so we tied him up and tossed him aside before moving on to the next stage of our plan: splitting up into three groups and taking over their ships.

But this was where the problem arose: we'd decided to use the run-down skiffs that the pirates had left behind. All my students mounted theirs perfectly fine, but I alone was left there mortified.

My hands couldn't reach the handlebars. My feet couldn't reach the pedals.

I had never despised being in a child's body more than that moment. Physically, I was only seven years old, so I couldn't drive a skiff made for an adult. Admittedly, it seemed very obvious once I was faced with the issue. But the plan had been for me to board the frontmost airship by myself and swiftly take control. My students were already split up between the other two ships, so they couldn't accompany me.



I needed a driver. Skywalking was too difficult for me at this level. Most martial artists could run through the sky easily, but I still hadn't trained enough yet in this life. Maybe I could've attempted a short distance, but this was far greater than I could manage.

"Someone ride in front of me." With no other choice left, I called out to the crew standing nearby, but no one volunteered. In fact, everyone looked very reluctant.

That made sense. I was about to raid a sky pirate crew's airship, after all. My navigator would have a dangerous job. Plus, I was sure many of the crew wanted to ask why exactly a child was about to go off on her own. No one said anything because it wasn't the time.

"Would you be okay with me?"

And then suddenly, an unexpected voice spoke up. When I turned around, there was Tork.

"I *am* the one designated to go on business trips for Cedony Trading. I ride airships a lot and I've done my research, so I know quite a lot about them. I might be able to be of assistance if any problems occur with the ship."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "It might be dangerous, you know?"

"But you'll be with me. How could I be in danger?"

I was stunned into silence.

Did you see that, my dear students? THAT is the correct evaluation of me. We could be surrounded by tens of A-rank monsters and I'd take them all down solo. You're all deeply underestimating me. Do you understand that? If you don't, then get it together already. It's about time you knew this. Stop messing around.

"Yo, why's the little rascal lookin' at us all smug?" Anzel whispered to Fressa.

"No clue. But she's cute when she looks proud of herself," Fressa whispered back.

"Oh, I know. She's making a face that's saying, *We'll win this for sure, but do be careful.* She's worried about us," Gandolph said.

“No, she definitely isn’t. She must be thinking to herself, *Oh, you flatter me so*, with that exaggerated childishness of hers. I’ve spent the most time with her, so I notice these things,” Lynokis replied with confidence.

Man... It didn’t get across to you guys at all, did it?

They were the ones whom I wanted to understand this concept the most and yet they were the ones who understood it the least. Anzel and Lynokis would be getting a tongue-lashing later, though. *Don’t you start calling me a rascalion too, Anzel. And Lynokis, you need to show more respect.*

If we’d observed correctly, the other pirates had no idea what was going on inside our airship. In which case, they likely wouldn’t attack us right away. If anything happened, we could easily hold the captain and their fellow crewmates hostage. That should discourage any possible cannon fire unless they really hated the men we’d captured. I didn’t think they would so easily abandon their comrades, but I could make no guarantees.

In any case, the plan went forward unchanged. We’d proceed as we’d discussed, charging at all three ships directly and immediately fighting the pirates onboard. We had to take down around ten people each as fast as possible. *Definitely looking forward to this. This’ll make for a nice summer memory.*

“We’ll start by taking control of the deck. Once I enter the ship’s cabin, you can board,” I instructed Tork as he sat down in front of me and grabbed the handles.

“Got it. For now, you only need me to get you close to the ship, right?”

“Correct.” So long as he got the skiff close enough, I could jump onto the airship from afar and take down the pirates. Once I was finished there, Tork would then be able to safely land. There was no need for him to put himself in unnecessary danger by dropping me off directly on the deck. It’d all be over in a flash anyway.

Right now, we were in a precarious situation that left us open to cannon fire. It seemed like it would be an unlikely move on their part, but I couldn’t

completely write off the possibility.

We were running out of time, so I kept the briefing for our last-minute addition to a minimum.

“Okay, let’s head out!” Leeno called, signaling for the five skiffs to take off through the flight hatch.

The wind up in the sky was strong. Once we left the windbreak granted by the high-speed liner, we were immediately at the mercy of the whipping gales.

“All right, I’m gonna accelerate! Hold on tight!” Tork shouted back, before the skiff dancing like a leaf in the air suddenly roared to life. When I looked over my shoulder, Lynokis, Gandolph, Anzel, and Fressa were all heading toward their respective airships.

I turned back ahead. In front of us was a green airship turned to the side so it could block the path as much as possible. There was a flashy mural of a hammerhead shark drawn on the ship’s hull. The paintwork left a powerful impression, signaling immediately to any onlookers that the ship belonged to sky pirates.

They also had six cannons all aimed at our airship.

“Approach from above!” I shouted. “Make sure they can see us!”

“You *want* them to see us?!”

“They already know we’re here! If we try to hide, they’ll get skittish!”

The pirates were already watching us from the deck. They’d already seen that the skiff wasn’t carrying their mates and had no doubt informed the vice-captain. If we tried to act sneaky now, they’d become wary of us.

On the other hand, by boldly flying in head-on, since their captain was still absent, they might think we were messengers. At the very least, it would stop them from immediately firing at us. Probably. I’d have liked to think they would at least wait to hear what we had to say...

I fully intended to take them all down the minute I landed, though.

I’d seen six people on the deck. None of them looked particularly strong.

Don't worry, I knew this would happen. I had predicted they would be weak. I'm not disappointed, because I already predicted it.

I made a plan to take down the six here and then break into the cabin.

"I'll get off here! Fly over and then take a lap around the ship! I'll get this place cleaned up for you!"

"Got it!"

As the skiff passed over the top of the airship, I leaped off. All six of the crew looked up at me.

Yeah, you keep doing that. Make sure you don't blink.

I rolled along the deck to soften my landing and then immediately rammed a fist into the first person's stomach. Flipping over, I chopped the neck of the second beside him, stole the dagger by their waist, and threw it handle-first toward the one farthest away from me. Without even waiting to see if the butt of the knife hit the third's face or not, I used a dampened Rumbling Thunder with a lightning-fast step forward, slamming it into the fourth, and then kicked the fifth in such a way that he perfectly collided heads with the sixth.

Cool, we're done.

I primed my senses, and once I was satisfied that I'd hit everyone on the deck, I headed toward the cabin door—and all six of the sky pirates behind me collapsed at once.

All of that had taken a single breath. Honestly, taking down the twelve on the high-speed liner had been much easier; it took much less effort to take the enemy down when they were all gathered in a narrow space.

The pirates on the deck would've only been able to keep track of me as I descended. There was no way they'd been able to keep up with my movements once I landed and began my assault. Their foolish captain at least had fast reflexes. He might not have been able to defeat me, but he might have been able to react in some fashion if he had been here.

Still, this was what you came to expect when your opponents were regular people.

The crew members in the cabin likely hadn't even realized they were under attack yet. Personally, I'd have had way more fun if I'd been caught, but it would cause a lot of trouble for everyone else if the crew panicked and fired the cannons, so this stealthier approach suited me fine.

In any case, it was time to clean up the interior. There was no point wasting time here.

There were hiding spots inside the ship, so it was simple enough to stealthily take the crew members down. It was even simpler than taking control of the deck. I found myself thinking back to when I'd sneaked out to that restaurant during our winter expedition in Vanderouge.

I quietly, but quickly, continued farther inside—until I suddenly heard a very familiar boom from outside. I recognized it as the sound of the high-speed liner's turbo boost. Tork followed the plan and signaled to the liner once he was able to land on the deck, letting them know that this ship could neither move nor fire.

Now that the high-speed liner had managed to make it away from the front line, we had no need to worry about it being shot down. We'd successfully carried out the greatest priority.

“Wh-What the hell was that about?! How can it go so fast?!”

A man who looked like he could be the vice-captain was on the bridge. Both the fact he was stationed here and his slightly more cleaned-up appearance compared to his men indicated he was probably the second-in-command.

He stood there stunned by our ship's insanely fast retreat, which was an unsurprising reaction given the way it had soared right above this one.

And then...

“Huh?!”

“Hello there.”

He was stunned by the little girl who had casually strolled up and stood next to him.

He was my last target. With this final blow, I could consider my raid of the airship complete.

When I returned to the deck, Tork had tied up all the pirates I had knocked out.

“Done in there?” he asked.

“Yes. I knocked out seven men.” It was just as the captain had said. Sort of. For being “around ten people,” the final number might have been a little over; there were thirteen here, which, added with a few of those that had raided our ship, made around sixteen in total. The truth was just a tad higher than the information he’d given us.

But it wasn’t worth dwelling on. I’d have suspected he’d given deliberately false information if there had been a difference of over ten, but that captain had been arrogant enough that it wasn’t surprising that he just didn’t know the exact number of the people on his ship. I didn’t personally believe he’d deliberately skewed the information.

I could take on however many pirates came my way, but I was a little worried about my students. I knew they would probably be fine, but anything could go wrong in a real battle. *Just don’t underestimate your enemy.*

We’d managed to give the high-speed liner an opportunity to escape. All that remained here were the three pirate ships, but I couldn’t tell what was going on in the other two ships from where I stood on the deck.

“Lily,” Tork called to me while I stared at the faraway pirate ships.

“Yes, yes, I’ll help too.”

“No, that’s not what I was going to say.”

It wasn’t? He hadn’t been about to tell me to stop daydreaming and help tie up the rest of the pirates?

“Could it be that...you’re stronger than Leeno?”

Well then... Given he had seen the way we lured the pirates to our airship and the way I had countered the captain and even how I’d split up our group, there

was plenty of evidence for his theory. It was a reasonable question to ask. In fact, maybe the reason he'd accompanied me was to ask that very thing.

I turned my back to him. "It's said that there are some things in this world you're better off not knowing, right? To keep cooperating smoothly, we need to maintain an appropriate distance. What do you think, Mr. Tork?"

What I really meant was, *Don't look into this any further or I will end our partnership.* We already had such a wonderful business relationship. Not only had we maintained friendly relations, but it was also mutually beneficial. I didn't want his foolishness to destroy this.

Tork was silent for a moment, considering. "Okay, fine. I'm sorry. That was a silly question. I really did want to get closer to you and Leeno, but I'll back off."

Yes, that was the only correct answer—to back off. But I was certain he hadn't truly given up deep inside. He was likely thinking to himself, *Got a bit ahead of myself there. I need to take my time with this...* He was a businessman all the way down to the bone. He wouldn't give up on a payday so easily.

Either way, taking his time was best. If he was acquainted with us long enough, he'd inevitably end up learning our secrets.

While we tied up the pirates inside the ship and checked each of the rooms for any treasure, I received word from my students: they'd successfully taken control of the other ships.

After we'd taken control of the three airships of the Hammerhead Sky Pirates, the high-speed liner returned. None of my students had been injured; it had probably been an easy win for them.

We moved all of the tied up pirates to our ship and shoved them into the storage area. It was both hilarious and sad seeing around forty grown-up men roughly thrown into a room together. I doubt any of them had been manhandled like this at their age.

We decided to stand right in front of them as we discussed how we'd deal with them. Incidentally, that "we" was only me, my students—or from an outsider's perspective, Leeno the adventurer and her party—Tork, and our

captain.

There was a possibility we'd be dealing with the pirates in a more...unsavory way. Our ship's crew was made up of civilian engineers who wouldn't be used to more violent situations—we didn't want to traumatize them if we decided to take a bloodier course of action.

"I believe the Hammerhead Sky Pirates are active in both Vanderouge and Marvelia." Tork's travel experience really was nothing to sneeze at. He was always so knowledgeable on the goings-on of the skies.

"They must have overhunted on their home turf," the captain theorized. "Their prey must have decreased so much that they decided to try their luck near Altoire's borders until things picked up again."

In other words, they'd gone on an expedition for money, same as us.

"Then will we receive substantial reward money if we were to hand them over to Marvelia?" Lynokis asked.

"Possibly, yes," Tork replied. "But Marvelia has always been a closed off and hostile country. In their eyes, Cedony Trading are outsiders. They're not a country we necessarily want to negotiate with when it comes to matters of money. It's highly likely they'll try to avoid payment or find a way to fraudulently report us to our own government. Even if we somehow managed to persuade them to honor the reward, it likely wouldn't be much, and we couldn't guarantee when it would get to you."

The effort wouldn't be worth the reward, essentially.

"They sound like quite the difficult country," I whispered to Anzel beside me, trying not to disturb the adults' conversation.

"Yeah, sorta," he said with a nod. "They've got their whole mech thing they're bettin' on over there. Generally, they want to get into wars. Their biggest obstacle is that their airship technology ain't up-to-date, so they have no way to actually transport those mechs. Instead, they're twiddlin' their thumbs not actually tryin' to attack anyone, and it's been like that for decades."

Very interesting. I'd heard about these "mechs," but I wondered just what they were like. Apparently, they were massive full-body armors controlled with

mana and manastones...

“I’m actually from Marvelia,” Fressa admitted, twirling her hair with her fingers. “Left when I was still a kid, though, so I don’t really know what things are like these days. Can’t say I have the best memories.”

Well, that was new information. Thinking back, Phyledia was also from Marvelia. She was the daughter of the noble Cauculis family.

“Please wait!” The sky pirate captain with his hands tied behind his back suddenly shouted. He was standing up on his knees and looking right at...me? Why? Why me? “Don’t send us to Marvelia! If we get sent there, they’ll put us all to death! I wouldn’t mind if it was just me... Actually, no, I would mind. I don’t want to die. I’d literally beg for my life or lick your shoes or even strip if it meant you’d let me go, but the last thing I want is for these guys here to be put to death on my account!”

Oh. I...I see. You’d strip, would you? Well, okay then. I see your resolve. I still had no idea why he was looking right at me as he said all that, but his determination came through clear as day, regardless.

“We’re just small fries, y’know? Even if you handed us over to Marvelia, you’d get chump change in return—if you get anything at all. If you even try to negotiate with them, they’ll make sure you have such a terrible time that you’d start seeing it as a loss even if you’d break even! I’m telling you this as the captain of said small fry pirate crew!”

I didn’t like how lowly he spoke of himself and his crew, but I wouldn’t lie, they’d definitely given off the scent of weaklings since the moment I’d met them, so at least his assessment wasn’t inaccurate.

“You say that, but you all have raided goods from several merchants, haven’t you?” Tork’s eyes were cold as he looked down at the captain. “In some cases, you’ve even *killed*, haven’t you? Why should I have any sympathy for you?”

Whenever Tork interacted with me or Lynokis, he was always polite and full of smiles so over the top that it almost felt like he was being *too* considerate of us. He came across as a kind uncle that happened to be extra ambitious. Now though, I could see he held the cold rationale of a businessman that he wasn’t afraid to bring out when he needed to.

“I won’t make any excuses for our actions! We did all of those things! We’ve killed! We’ve killed many! I won’t even say that we did it to survive, as much as I want to! But please only take *my* head, as much as I don’t want to die! I’m begging you, you gotta save them!”

He flung his upper body forward and slammed his head into the ground with a loud thud.

“I really mean it! Please spare their lives!” It almost seemed he would stop there, but then he continued, “Um...and preferably spare my life too if you can! Just if you can!”

Don’t tack that on, you wishy-washy fool.

Despite my own disappointment, the captain’s words and willingness to demean himself seemed to have resonated with Tork a little.

“What shall we do?” he asked me.

“Why are you asking me? Ask my master.”

“Well, because...”

Because?

Because the pirate captain was turning his head up to look at me even with his forehead slammed against the floor? Because the pirates that had regained consciousness were looking at me? Because my students, including Leeno, were looking at me? Was that what he wanted to say? Did he want to say that out of everyone here, I, the child, was the one with the right to choose the outcome?

Technically, I was...but not on the surface. From the outside I was supposed to look like the one at the bottom of the hierarchy, so I really needed everyone to stop looking at me so blatantly.

“Why are *you* looking at me?” Never mind everyone else, I’d been wondering for a while now why this pirate captain had been talking specifically to me. I at least wanted to clarify that much. I should’ve been the one least suited to hearing him out.

“Because in my eyes, you’re clearly at the top of the pecking order here. You look like some little rascalion girl, but I kinda can’t see you like that anymore.”

I see... Perhaps my strength had been leaking out without me realizing—and by that, I mean I was accidentally emitting an overwhelming pressure. This was a little unfortunate.

“Seriously, I’ll do absolutely anything you want, so could you maybe consider saving us? You must have veggies you hate, like carrots or peppers or something? I’ll eat ’em all for you, and if you’re tired, I’ll carry you on my back. I’ll be at your every beck and call.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Lynokis coldly refused with no room for argument. She was likely thinking that she alone was enough to serve me.

Really though, what should we do? Given all their crimes to this point, we couldn’t just let them get off scot-free. But somewhere along the way, I’d found it hard to hate the guy. It’d leave a bad taste in my mouth if I essentially sent him to his death. He was so desperately begging for his life too...

“Lily, could you leave him to me? I want to confirm something before you decide what action to take.”

Tork wanted them?

“Then how about we leave them to your discretion? You can do whatever you please with them. If there’s solid logic behind your choice, we won’t object to it. Right, Master?” I asked, looking to my attendant. Our representative was really *supposed to be* Leeno, so she had to be the one to make the final call. Though the gesture was more for show than anything.

And so, my second summer vacation filled with recordings and hunting came to an end. My students and I returned to Altoire with the memories of the fun we’d had right at the very end. Perhaps we returned with something a little more tangible than the memories, as well.

With that, my second semester of my second year of elementary school was about to begin.

A day after we returned to the capital of Altoire, my students and I gathered in a booth at the Chocolate Lily’s Aroma for lunch.

“Despite everything that happened, it was quite fun,” Fressa said, recounting

the tales of our expedition to Lynette, who had been unable to join us.

“It sounds like you all went through a lot.”

The cohort’s contributions to the billion kram fund would be continuing for just a little longer, so it was worth keeping Lynette in the loop. We gave her a brief rundown of everything that had happened while eating our main course, finishing our stories just as dessert arrived.

“Young Mistress, shall I tell them now?” Lynokis asked.

I nodded. It was time to talk about the real reason I’d gathered them here.

“I have consulted with Cedony Trading about a few questions we had, so allow me to report their reply,” Lynokis began. Even I hadn’t heard what came of her recent visit yet.

This morning, I’d had Lynokis visit Cedony as Leeno—there was a lot we wanted to ask about. I imagined I wouldn’t be the only one who was curious, so I’d called everyone here to hear it with me. My students were no longer completely unrelated to these discussions, so I thought they had the right to know, and it would have been annoying to go and tell each of them individually. This was the most efficient way to go about it, especially taking into account the fact they each had their own lives outside of this.

“First, about the one billion krams. With everything we earned from our last expedition, our savings have now passed eight hundred million.”

Wow, we’d made it that far? If we hadn’t been able to cross four hundred million by the end of this summer, plans for the tournament would have been out the window, but never mind four hundred million, *one billion* was now in our sights.

“Earning one billion krams in two years sounded like a bad joke at first, but I can’t believe we’re actually close to managin’ it,” Anzel muttered. “In fact, we earned *eight hundred million* in *one*. My sense of monetary value’s goin’ haywire like this. I really made five million krams in a month...”

“We shouldn’t earn so much we stand out,” Gandolph warned. “Leeno already stands out far too much as it is; who knows what troubles will fall upon her.”

Yeah! It'll be terrible if your sense of monetary value goes completely crazy like mine. You'll end up thinking you can raise a billion krams as if that's normal. Except I'd never held money in my life, so I hadn't had a sense of monetary value to warp in the first place.

"Actually, we're doing this specifically so I stand out, so that isn't a problem," Lynokis clarified. "In fact, there were times we took on missions for the express purpose of notoriety."

She was right. A lot of what we'd been doing definitely had the intention of spreading her name far and wide. We were successful too. Nowadays, she had become such an acclaimed upstart that she was known as the best adventurer in Altoire.

Many people had at least heard of her. In fact, she'd become so famous that Reliared complained to me one day about how she wanted to interview Leeno, but her requests were always ignored. If she'd become so famous that people wanted to *interview* her, then the martial arts tournament would definitely cause a good amount of buzz when it was announced. Naturally, word of her should also have been spreading around our neighboring countries by now. We'd even asked Cedony directly to help fuel the fire.

Lynokis continued her report. "It is now confirmed that the martial arts tournament will be held. Things are already in motion behind the scenes, so it's out of our hands now."

His Majesty's gotten started? Good. He'd said he wanted to spend a year preparing, so this was a good time to start. The tournament was intended for next winter, so this gave us over a year of leeway.

"Also, as our goal was one billion krams, Cedony Trading have requested that they be allowed to invest the remaining two hundred million."

They were willing to invest in our cause?

"I told them we would like to think about it, but how should we respond?"

I didn't see any real reason to refuse.

"I imagine they want some of the rights to the tournament. Tell them to negotiate with His Majesty." And, with that... "As anticlimactic as it is, I suppose

we have now met our goal of one billion krams.” I’d intended to keep adventuring a little longer, but this seemed like a good place to bring this to a close. My students had all been trying their best even though they had their own jobs; I would feel bad forcing them to continue going along with this.

“Thank you for all your contributions. I am truly grateful.” For some reason, after giving my thanks, there was sparse applause from around the table. I didn’t understand why. Was it similar to how everyone celebrated when a magivision project was successful? Or were they just unconsciously celebrating the fact that we had succeeded in a plan that should’ve been impossible?

Well, the reason didn’t matter. What mattered was that we’d reached a billion krams. All we had to do now was wait until the tournament next year.

“On to the next topic.”

We’d heard the most important information, but there were still a few other things we needed to discuss.

“Cedony have asked if we would be willing to continue hunting monsters for them,” Lynokis continued. “If possible, by taking their specific commissions. In other words, we would be adventurers on Cedony’s payroll.”

I see.

“That’s something I’ll leave to each of you individually,” I said. “None of you are natural-born adventurers, but maybe it could serve as a good way to earn some extra pocket money here and there while also building a relationship with Cedony?”

“That’s reasonable,” Lynokis agreed with a nod. “In that case, the decision is left with all of you.”

There was no need for me to make that decision for them.

“Hey, can I ask something? There’s something I’ve been wondering about,” Fressa said, raising her hand. She had clearly been waiting for there to be a pause in the conversation. “The whole thing with the billion krams is finished now, right?”

“Did you not hear the young mistress? That is literally what she just said.”

Lynokis was as cold as ever. Did she have to be so rude about it?

Completely unfazed by Lynokis's coldness, Fressa continued without batting an eye, "Yeah, I know. But it's because I heard her that I'm wondering. So...does this mean we can't train under Lily anymore?"

Oh. Of course. That was a valid question. They weren't *officially* my disciples—they were only training under me at the moment because I said I would train them in exchange for their help raising the billion krams. Now that we had reached that goal, what became of our agreement?

I'd actually forgotten about that, but clearly my students hadn't.

"Damn, you ain't beatin' around the bush, are ya? I was gonna pretend I forgot."

"Indeed. I'd planned to pretend I'd forgotten so we could continue with our training."

It seemed Anzel and Gandolph had been worried about it themselves.

"You can't do that! We have to properly figure things like this out. It's not like Lily's got tons of free time; she can't train us forever."

They all had their own concerns on the matter. Lynette likely stayed quiet because she had her own reasons for wanting to continue training. In fact, she likely already knew that she had no way of getting out of it now. I still needed her to take responsibility for teaching my brother about chi, after all.

You alone I won't let escape so easily after your stunt! You're absolutely training until you're at a level I deem acceptable! And then I'll have you teach my brother properly! Until he's at a level I'm satisfied with too! You won't be free of me until then, I promise you this!

"Let's shelve those discussions for now. There are other things we need to discuss first," I said. Honestly, there wasn't a whole lot I had left to teach them. I'd already instructed them on how to practice their chi manipulation, so they knew more than enough to continue training on their own. They likely wouldn't need any more lessons unless their goal was to become the strongest. But that wasn't something we needed to discuss right now. I'd talk with anyone that wanted to continue training with me later.

I prompted Lynokis to continue.

“The rest are just some small matters that I need to confirm with you, so it would be fine for us to discuss those in private, Young Mistress.”

In other words, they were matters that had to do with me personally. They were probably related to the Liston family or magivision. There was no reason for the rest to be privy to either of those topics.

“That said, there is just one thing left that I think everyone should hear—it’s to do with those sky pirates.”

Oh, there’s an update?

“Those were the pirates you had to fight, correct?” Lynette asked, having been the only one not in attendance at the time.

“Yes, exactly,” Lynokis said. “We returned to Altoire with them and now have more information on their consequences. It’s quite major, so do listen closely.”

We’d even brought their three ships along, but they’d only come with us part of the way. Naturally, we couldn’t just bring them into the capital, so they’d split up with us and had been brought to a floating island by some of Cedony’s crew. Incidentally, we hadn’t traveled with the high-speed liner’s turbo boost, but by being dragged by the pirate ships. It made for a much more relaxed journey.

“As it turns out, the majority of them were Marvelian airship engineers.”

Excuse me?

“Engineers?”

“Yes, Young Mistress.”

What were craftsmen doing becoming sky pirates?! I’d assumed they were some random thugs that had banded together.

“To put it briefly, Marvelia are looking to develop high-spec airships. They put together a development team for that purpose, but they were fired when they couldn’t produce results, and were even chased out of their country on top of that.”

And so they'd ended up becoming sky pirates.

I could see how it *would* be useful to have engineers as a staple part of airship crews. It was already strange enough that those lumps of metal could float in the sky, so it was only natural they had various technical mishaps along the way.

"Tork had heard rumors of engineers turned sky pirates from Marvelia, so that was what he'd wanted to confirm with them."

Ah, he had said at the time that there was something he wanted to check. I'd found it too much of a pain, so I hadn't bothered sticking around.

"Since there will be a large-scale martial arts tournament next year, he'd apparently been wondering if there was some way to make use of around forty former pirates as cheap labor. Now it turns out that many of them are airship engineers."

In other words, he was wondering if he could make them work for Cedony. Certainly a businessman's line of thought.

"Sounds good, no? So long as both parties agree," I said with a shrug. The way Lynokis described it, it sounded more like they would be treated like slaves, but if they were happy with that, then there wasn't anything for me to criticize.

And with that fairly long lunch out of the way, we separated for the day.

Epilogue

The second school semester would be starting tomorrow. Our busy expedition had come to an end, I'd returned to the dorms, and things were finally calming down, yet the new semester was already upon me—what a tough schedule.

"We somehow finished preparations for the new semester in time," Lynokis said.

"Indeed."

Lined up on my desk was all the stationery for the coming classes as well as all my summer homework—my summer homework that I'd completely finished. *Hmph, you have been defeated this time. Don't think you can win against me, you arrogant homework. Never show your face to me again!*

If only that were enough to keep it away.

Our break time schedule had been very to the minute; I'd managed to organize one with Lynokis that would let us finish everything in time. The only days of this summer vacation that had really felt like a *vacation* were these last couple days after returning to Altoire... Well, at least I hadn't wasted them.

Looking back, though, I still had my regrets. I never visited either Altoire or the Silver territories this time. More specifically, I hadn't been able to participate in either of their recordings.

This was because I had prioritized the billion krams. It had been too difficult to find time for additional recordings on top of that. Both Reliared and Hildetaura had invited me last semester, and they'd naturally made sure to send official requests directly to the Liston Estate as well, but this time, I'd prioritized the expedition. If my students and I hadn't managed to earn enough money, then the tournament would remain a dream. I needed to make it up to the girls at some point... Which reminded me...

"Have you heard from Lynette?" I asked Lynokis as she poured me a cup of

tea after putting away my stationery.

“Pardon?”

“About my brother’s summer vacation.”

“Ah, yes, just a little.”

Oh, really?

“Well, given it was Lynette who told me, I assume she was exaggerating a little, but according to her, the young master fulfilled your role wonderfully.”

My family had apparently made arrangements to have Neal fill in for me on Hildetaura’s and Reliared’s recordings. I wasn’t sure how exactly they reached that agreement, but suddenly, he said he would be participating in Hildetaura’s fishing village festival and doing some recording in the Silver territories. It would probably be a little while until I could see those episodes, maybe sometime in the middle of the next semester.

I was curious about the end result, but regardless, I was sure neither Hildetaura nor Reliared had complaints. Reliared especially had likely been much happier working with Neal than with me. I also wondered how well Neal took to the screen, so that was another reason to look forward to the broadcast.

That aside...

“I’ll be heading out once I’ve finished my tea.”

“Oh, I suppose it is getting to be that time.”

It was almost time. I had the option to deliberately arrive late to annoy my opponent, but it wasn’t a very necessary step, so I decided I may as well go and get it over with.

“Young Mistress, go give her a light thrashing.”

“I will.”

I wasn’t that concerned with the outcomes of matches against opponents I could beat whenever I wished, but first impressions were always important.

The harsh sun beat down on me. Even though tomorrow was the beginning of fall, the days were still unbelievably hot. Underneath that blazing sky, around thirty kids had gathered outside the Satomi Swift Swordsmanship dojo. They weren't just elementary and middle school students, but a few from high school as well. I was surprised by how many spectators there were, and with such a wide age range.

They must have all been bored. The new semester started tomorrow, but today there was nothing else for them to do. There was not enough time left to go out to town, yet still enough empty time for them to twiddle their thumbs. And while they sat doing nothing, suddenly they'd heard word of something exciting going on. The natural response would be to go check it out. I couldn't imagine there was anything else to it.

"Hey, look! It's Nia!"

"It's Nia in the flesh!"

Yes, yes, I see you. I waved at all the children shouting my name as I approached.

"Nia!"

Oh, Sanowil Badr was here too. I hadn't had much time to spar with him in the first semester. I'd entertain him after this if there was enough time. He was my brother's senior, so it was worth being nice to him.

"Mast— Nia!"

Even Gandolph was here. Had he had nothing better to do either? I waved to that giant of a man as I arrived at my destination. Waiting there was Kikirira Amon, hands on her hips and chest puffed out as her red headband fluttered in the wind. The production crew of the junior broadcasting station were there on standby.

Her expression was good, and she looked plenty enthusiastic. The only thing that was a shame was our clear difference in strength. That wasn't an obstacle that could be overcome with pure spirit.

My eyes met with Wagnes, the director, as I walked up. He nodded at me. I understood what I had to do in that moment.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting,” I said, stopping in front of Kikirira. “Thank you for your letter of challenge.” I pulled out an envelope from my pocket. Scribbled messily where the sender’s name was meant to be written was, “LETTER OF CHALLENGE” in massive letters. It was so boldly provocative I couldn’t help but be excited by it.

And then the contents were strangely polite: *“If you have time, let’s have a race. The time and place are written below.”*

I’d considered ignoring it since I didn’t really want to get that involved with Kikirira, but now I was glad I’d come. With this many gathered, if I had been a no-show, it wouldn’t have looked good for me or the junior production crew. *That was close.*

As I stood there smiling with the letter of challenge in my hand, Kikirira roared, “I challenge you, Nia Liston!”

When I locked eyes with the director, I became positive that this was a recording for the junior team, and their cameras were already rolling. The idea must have been a special where Kikirira challenged the undefeated dog racing champion Nia Liston. They were likely trying to show off Kikirira’s athletic ability in the best way they knew how.

Whether it made for an interesting show or not, if Kikirira managed to win here, they would definitely be able to get it broadcast on the capital’s channel. I was famous for my perfect win streak, after all.

But...

“N-No way...?!”

I dashed off the second the signal was given, and won.

I at least made sure to adjust my speed so the race looked close. Like Lynokis said, I only gave her a light thrashing.

The kids watching us all gasped in surprise, but Kikirira was shocked speechless. She was genuinely surprised she had lost. She must have had real confidence in her speed.

“I...I lost a race...for the first time ever...”

Ah, that was why she was so shocked. I would say she was on the fast end as far as amateurs were concerned, at least.

I turned to the surprised older girl and said, “Challenge me again one day.” A very standard line. Those cameras were still rolling, after all. I couldn’t say anything too aggressive. Not that I felt such a desire in the first place.

All right, that should put off Kikirira from challenging me for a while. I should be able to spend my second semester in peace.

To no one’s surprise, our race was not aired.

The world of magivision was cruel indeed.

Extra Story: A Job for Fressa

“It’s been a while since Lily stopped by.”

The Shifty Shadow Rat was as booming with business as always. Though given how cheap their drinks were, it didn’t matter that they had a lot of customers, they weren’t making much of a profit.

Sitting at the counter was Leeno, also known as Lynokis, who had recently been making waves in adventuring circles. Slacking on work next to her was the barmaid, Fressa.

“She’s busy right now. She may not have a lot of free time.” After returning from her hunting trips, Lynokis would have a drink at the Shadow Rat before returning to her apartment. The time she spent having the drink was a ploy to get those interested in her off her tail.

There were many patrons in the bar right now who were secretly after her. She was the adventurer making the most money in the country right now. There were many who wanted to learn more about her, who wanted to learn who she really was, or who wanted to drag her into their parties.

“Lily, hmm? I’ve yet to meet the girl,” Geese muttered as he polished a glass behind the bar. He was a recent hire, an older man who was a friend of Anzel’s. They’d made sure to tell him in advance that Lynokis was using their bar as a base to help obscure her trail. As someone affiliated with the underworld, he never asked too many questions, so he was pretty easy to work with.

“I’m sure you’ll meet her one day...or maybe not, actually,” Fressa said, trailing off into a mumble.

Geese was often on the night shift, but Lily—Nia Liston—was only active until the evening. The academy had a curfew that she had no choice but to abide by.

“Is that so? That’s a shame. I’d love to at least introduce myself.”

If the opportunity showed itself, then introductions would certainly be made. For now, though, Nia was especially busy. She was in her third semester as a

first year, and that meant she also had to prepare for the following school year. She had plenty of magivision work on her plate, but most importantly, she had her promotion exam.

Nia was not stupid. According to Lynokis, she diligently attended all of her classes, and she got good scores on any quizzes, so she shouldn't have any problems with the exam, but the girl herself didn't seem to think the same.

Because of her natural resistance to studying, Nia had absolutely no confidence in her smarts. She could do her homework if she really put her mind to it, but she always hated it, and she was always making very strange complaints like, "If there's a math god out there, I'm gonna punch 'em 'til they're dead!" It was both a childish remark and also not.

As her personal attendant, Lynokis always found herself a little frustrated.

"You back to your main job tomorrow?" Fressa asked.

"Yeah, I'll be swapping with Lynette. Are you not going hunting with her? You don't seem to join us much these days."

Fressa had agreed to help with Nia's goal of earning a billion krams, so this wasn't an unusual question. She'd already received her reward in the form of lessons on chi.

"I'm a little bit conflicted. My problem is that I'm not trained in killing monsters. A lot of the time, I can't help take down the big-ticket beasts."

Fressa's real job was as an assassin. In other words, she specialized in killing *people*. She was well-versed in methods for killing humans, but when it came to anything else, she struggled. After the many expeditions she'd joined in on, she'd come to realize that hunting monsters wasn't efficient for her.

Her small weapons were made for people—they barely did any damage to large monsters, and there was only so much money she could make with small monsters.

"I feel like I could make more money with my real job. But...that's a little scary, isn't it?"

"Yes, I would say so." Lynokis was glaring sharply at her. "If you were ordered

to kill someone tied to us, I would have no choice but to kill you.”

Lynokis was being entirely serious. If Fressa killed anyone related to this “us”—in other words, the Liston family—then her life would be forfeit. Fressa laughed cheerfully in response. *You’re so kind leaving it at just a warning*, she thought to herself. “Yeah, makes sense,” she agreed. “Hunting a VIP under these circumstances would practically be a death sentence.”

Fressa had always thought that she could take Lynokis down in a fight. The issue was Nia would absolutely come after her if Fressa dared lay a hand on her personal attendant, and there was no way she would win that one. Even running would be impossible. She could already envision that girl chasing after her to the ends of the world.

Types like Nia would never bend their own rules, especially when it came to settling a score—she’d put her life on the line to see it through. She was the type who didn’t act based on logic, instead purely acting based on what made her happy.

Fressa had been thinking for a little while now that maybe her time as an assassin was up; it was about time she got out of that life.

The deeper into the underworld your job took you, the harder it became to simply quit, and chances became higher that no one would acknowledge your resignation. Fressa knew too much about the dark side of this world to be left alone when she walked away. Her fellow assassins in the business would no doubt come after her. But a part of her was beginning to think that maybe she could take them down with her newfound abilities. Then again, maybe it was a bit too early...

She really did feel conflicted.

“Thanks for the drinks.” After having two drinks, Lynokis stood up from the counter. “See you both later.”

Lynokis exited out the back just as she always did. This was where she had one more job to do.

The eyes on her were numerous and omnipresent. They were within the

shadows, down the side alleys of the path, on the roofs, from the windows, even just loitering nearby. All eyes were turned to Lynokis leaving the bar. Where was she going? Where did she live? They wanted to know her address, about her private life, *everything* about the rumored Leeno the adventurer.

At this point, Leeno was known far and wide as the adventurer who had raised hundreds of millions of krams unfathomably quickly. Though the truth was slightly different, as far as outsiders were concerned, that was the situation. That was her reputation, and her strength was no doubt real. No matter who tried to get involved with her or attacked her, she would always effortlessly fend them off.

She was also impossible to track. Even though pro sleuths and veteran adventurers kept their eyes on her, her home remained a mystery—Lynokis had managed to shake off every last one of them.

“Hmm...” Lynokis stood motionless, searching for a blind spot among the many lines of sight. Now that she could manipulate her chi, it was easy to detect people’s presence. Her senses were definitely getting sharper. Chi enhanced the human body’s basic abilities, but even accounting for that, she had undoubtedly honed her ability to detect others. Nia had once examined the layout of a dungeon using chi, so Lynokis imagined if she kept training like this, she’d one day be able to do the same.

“Okay, that’ll do.” She’d found an escape route.

She set off with a power walk, but the moment she made her first turn, she burst into a full-speed run. Turning yet another corner, she used the walls and window frames to swiftly jump up onto the roofs.

“She disappeared?!”

“Damn it! Find her!”

Lynokis could hear the quiet voices coming from below disperse into separate searches.

Nice, I got them off my trail. Lynokis had made sure to bring along the change of clothes she’d left at the Shadow Rat, so she changed right there on the rooftop. She transformed from an adventurer into a regular city girl, and then

made her way back to her apartment using the roofs.

“What am I gonna do, Geese? She finally said something to me about it,” Fressa asked with a groan after Lynokis left. She hadn’t looked like she minded at the time, but her poker face had always been good—it was often the case that her expression and her emotions didn’t match up.

“Are you referring to the expeditions that Leeno mentioned?”

“Yeah, that.”

Those expeditions were the reason Geese had been hired. Anzel was out on an expedition right this second, and normally, Fressa would have been expected to accompany them. But right now, she was conflicted. She was the only one who found it much less efficient to try and raise money through hunting. Even if she joined them, she could barely help.

“I can’t imagine either you or Anzel owing someone a large debt. Did you...mess up on a large hit?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s more like we made an expensive purchase, and now we’re paying for it.” A billion krams to pay for the lecture fees on chi—that was how Fressa chose to view it. And she believed it was worth even more than that price. That was why she wanted to help Nia however she could.

Part of it was as simple as fear of repercussions for not repaying Nia, but more than anything, as a member of the underworld, she much preferred to pay off her debts as soon as possible. Leaving any outstanding was always one of those things that would catch up with you later down the line.

There was still a problem, though.

“Something I’ve personally learned is that trying to do things inefficiently leads to failure a good chunk of the time. At least, that’s how it is for me.” On jobs, she would often end up making a lot of unnecessary moves, or take too many risks. Or more like it was *because* she was making a lot of unnecessary moves that she ended up taking too many risks.

As far as Fressa was concerned, work was best carried out as swiftly as possible. The issue was that she couldn’t do that with monsters. In fact, the risk

she'd injure herself was much higher.

"I understand where you're coming from," Geese said. "Whether difficult or easy, money is money. In which case, there is nothing better than taking the easier option."

His understanding of her words was only half right, but either way, Fressa agreed. She would have loved to be able to pay Nia back without going out on these expeditions.

"Surely you've gotta know good ways to earn big money, Geese?"

"Why not enter the Umbral Arena?"

"Mmmm... I accidentally caused a bit of trouble a while back, so I'm not allowed to enter. It's dangerous for me to even get close."

"Adventurer commissions?"

"I'd need to register with the guild, so I couldn't take any big-ticket commissions for a while."

"Theft?"

"Mmmm... If I catch the eye of another big boss, my head's probably gone."

"Gambling?"

"I'm on the casino watch list too, so I'd probably get kicked out the second I entered."

Geese was shocked. Not by the number of incidents she'd caused, but that she'd caused all that trouble and was still alive. Was her luck that incredible, or was she just that good at her job? Or was it both?

"Why not join your party on their expeditions like they want you to?"

"After what I was just saying? You're so mean, Geese!"

"Hey, I want some drinks over here! I've been calling forever!"

Perhaps she'd slacked off for a bit too long. The thugs were starting to get testy.

"I hear ya, I hear ya! Coming to take your order!" Fressa returned to work

with her usual laid-back attitude.

Deep inside, though, she was still seriously worrying about what she should do.

“And so, I want money. You got any good offers for me?”

Spring was close, but the nights were still cold. It was on one of those nights when Fressa made her way to the warehouse district wearing all black. She came across as a completely different person than the barmaid of the Shadow Rat. She held that feminine allure that was dangerous and frightful yet still captivating. It made someone want to get close, but they knew they’d get hurt if they did. In that moment, Fressa completely embodied that kind of underworld dweller.

“Nope.”

The man she spoke with in a warehouse shadow was an information broker. The area wasn’t bustling with life, but there were definitely people around at all times, so they had to be careful if they wanted to avoid any curious gazes.

“You want a job that doesn’t involve killing, right? I don’t have anything besides assassinations that will get you the money you’re after.”

“Yeah, figures...” She’d been hitting up various information brokers over the past few days, but all of them had given the same response.

At night, the warehouse district became Altoire’s most dangerous location. Illegal businesses were everywhere, from the Umbral Arena to an unauthorized casino. To any other country, this would likely have been deemed the slums, but in Altoire—or at least, in the royal capital—there was no such thing as slums, so even though it was the “roughest” area, it was still relatively calm.

At least, at a glance.

It was because of that perceived calm that mafia or other rough types would come in from elsewhere—deeming it easily attainable turf—and try to cement their place as leaders of the Altoire underworld. But just because those lingering here appeared docile, that didn’t mean they were weak.

Altoire had plenty of dangerous types, like the organization of assassins known as the Qilong. Fressa even personally knew the strongest kid in the world. There were probably plenty of people out there who were strong and Fressa just didn't know them.

"Any deportations needed? No crazy types sneaked in?"

"There's as many as usual, but you're right, none seem especially significant. There's already guys with pretty solid control over that kind of thing, so it's unlikely they let any wild ones through."

Fressa was herself an illegal immigrant, but she'd arrived so many years ago that nowadays, the people who knew that truth were far eclipsed by those who didn't.

"No smuggling gigs?"

"There's some smaller jobs if you want to make a quick kram, but nothing significant. It doesn't help that the surface folks have a pretty serious eye on that kind of thing. This country isn't known for its peace for no reason."

"I see..."

Things were really getting dire for her. Smuggling objects or people across the border could often be a good way to get rich quick if you could manage it. Though the jobs only paid well because of how closely the Altoire authorities watched the underworld, so anyone with a bigger job had been laying low as of late.

There really was nothing she could pick up. At this rate, even hunting monsters would get her more money than this. It wasn't efficient, but she'd still be earning money, at least.

She hadn't been out on any expeditions for a while. If she didn't hurry up and start earning money again, Nia might come and scold her. The thought alone was terrifying. Anzel or any of the other party members nagging her for it was manageable, but the one person whose trust she didn't want to lose was Nia's.

There was still so much she wanted to learn. She wanted to become so much stronger. She'd finally received this opportunity to become infinitely more powerful. It would be a waste for her to let this chance pass her by.

If you wanted to live in the underworld, you needed to become strong.

Fressa wanted to at least become stronger than those she knew were stronger than her: the members of the Qilong, the Heroic Star Assembly, the Wild Beast Mercenaries, the Rampaging King of the White Orca Sky Pirates, also known as one of the Four Sky Kings. She didn't foresee bumping into them in the near future, but if she did, she knew a fight with them would be her end. There were many terrifying people in the world.

Top of the top was definitely Nia Liston, though. She was strong, like a whole different dimension of strong. And right now, Fressa had the opportunity to connect with that strength in her grasp.

She couldn't give up here.

"How much are you looking to make?"

"A million at minimum. The more the better."

"Yeah, nah, you ain't getting that from anything but a hit."

"I can't right now. Circumstances are a little...complicated." She was an assassin, yet right now, she couldn't risk doing assassin work. Her career really was over.

"Sorry for taking up your time."

There had been no good leads. Fressa turned away from the information broker and began her walk back. *Maybe going out hunting really is my only choice.*

No one remembered who'd started it, but any time Nia's students were on a flight, they'd always ask for somewhere in the airship to train.

This time, it was Fressa and Lynette.

"You're looking for work? I get why you're worried, but..."

Though the exact weapons they used were different, both of them fought while armed.

Lynette Bran had been introduced to Fressa as Lynokis's friend and Nia's

student, and had now become a fellow adventurer. Despite being Nia's student, Lynette used a weapon—a sword, to be specific. To Fressa, Lynette came across much more of an adventurer than Lynokis. And as fellow weapon wielders, Lynette could understand Fressa's worries and frustrations more than the others. Though apparently, Lynette was learning how to fight bare-handed.

"Have you considered wielding a bigger weapon?" Lynette asked.

"I don't think I'd be suited to it."

Contrary to their calm discussion, they were both quite tense. They were sparring with sharp weapons; either of them could be badly hurt if they let their guards down for even a moment.

"I'm not someone who's that attached to weapons in the first place," Fressa said.

"Yeah, you gave that...vibe!" Lynette dodged in the nick of time as the knife that she'd just deflected was suddenly flying at her again.

"It's really just about whether I'm fighting against a person or not."

"You really are strong..."

Fressa took advantage of Lynette's slight loss of balance and closed the distance between them, thrusting a knife up toward Lynette's neck.



Though in Fressa's opinion, Lynette managing to dodge that knife right after deflecting it was far more frightening. She had just used an advanced technique where the knife was thrown with only a flick of the wrist. She'd launched it the moment Lynette deflected her first attack, yet *she'd dodged it*.

It was a difficult-to-read attack that didn't require arm movement, could be launched from any position, and had no windup. Plus, since they were sparring, they were currently at close range. The number of people who could have reacted to that were... Well, recently, more people *had* been popping up, Fressa supposed. Nia had managed to catch the knife the first time too.

"But I can't take down large monsters with itty-bitty knives like these. I can barely take down medium-sized ones." She could injure them, but the blades couldn't lethally pierce them. Even the knife she had just thrown had been lacking in strength. At least with people, just aiming for their head was enough to take them out.

She took a step back from Lynette. "You should know by now that's all I have on me since I need to be able to conceal them. They're hidden weapons. But I've never been that attached to them." They were simply tools that let her efficiently carry out her work, nothing more.

The problem was that such a style wasn't very suited to hunting monsters.

"You *really* aren't suited to this."

"Thanks for not beating around the bush."

They were on their way back to Altoire after a few days of hunting. Every trip back, there would be a bath prepared for them that they would gladly dive into. That was when Lynette suddenly said those words.

She really wasn't suited to this.

"I'm thankful for your diversions and you make a good decoy, but you really aren't suited for hunting. You leave too many injuries on the prey."

"Especially the big ones, right?" Fressa knew that much without being told.

Lynokis, Anzel, and Gandolph all had attacks that let them crush the

monsters' skulls, while Lynette had the ability to behead or stab a fatal point in one attack. Fressa could do neither of those things. When she hunted a monster, she needed to slowly wear it down, but that decreased the value of her prey—her attacks damaged its hide and resulted in excessive blood loss.

Of course, Fressa wasn't happy about the situation either. She always thought that her strength was middle-of-the-road.

"See what I mean, though? Hunting just isn't efficient with me there."

"It's not just inefficient, it's detrimental. You always get in the way."

"Thanks for not beating around the bush..." This was yet another thing that Fressa knew without being told.

"Why not try asking Lily about it?"

"I have, though it was a pretty casual conversation."

"What did she say?"

"If I say too much, I might end up denying you of what makes your style good, so I can't give you any advice.' My style is just too different from hers, I guess."

Nia didn't use weapons to fight and she didn't know any assassination techniques either. In fact, the girl's strength was on such a completely different level that she didn't need to bother with such crafty tactics in the first place.

"But if you don't do anything, you'll just keep getting in the way," Lynokis chided.

"When I thank you for being straight with me, I don't mean it, you know." Fressa already knew that without being told! "Say that to me again and I'll take it out on your boobs. It really hurts my feelings, you know."

"On my...?" Lynette slowly scooted away from Fressa in the tub. Naturally, Fressa simply closed the gap again, remaining close enough to strike at any time.

"You what? You want a job that can get you good money other than killing? Sure, I know of something."

When Fressa threw the question at Nastine once again when he popped up at the Shadow Rat, his response surprised her.

“You do?!” She was shocked she’d finally gotten a positive response. She had fully expected to get another no.

“You bein’ serious, Nastine?” Anzel asked—he was the bartender on shift tonight. “There really somethin’ that nice?”

“Yeah? You guys should’ve heard about it too. It’s the underground waterways.”

That was all it took to click in Anzel’s and Fressa’s minds.

“You mean the usual surveys,” Fressa said. “I forgot one was due around this time.”

There were plenty of rumors surrounding the capital’s underground waterways. Some said that they were an escape route connected to the castle; others said that you could hear monsters at night. There was a more interesting rumor that it was the base for some assassin’s organization, but that had been debunked. Another said that there was some terrible murderer living down there.

All pretty common rumors for that kind of location, but the one thing that was definitely true was that the layout of the waterways was both large and complicated. Having a map wouldn’t help because the layout changed all the time. It wasn’t a dungeon, so it wasn’t changing naturally either; someone was deliberately increasing the routes or breaking down walls or blocking paths.

The dark underground was an area that people tended to avoid, especially with all its blind spots. That made it convenient for people to sneak in and alter the layout for their own gain. It was so big that you couldn’t see from end to end, and that made regular patrols a necessity.

The time and frequency of the surveys was regular enough, but the exact times were still fairly random. A lot of people would run if it leaked that one was due. Doing a surprise spot check was always the best way to go about it.

“If you can finish it in five days, you get three mil.”

“Three mil, huh?” It was Fressa’s ideal job if she could manage it. Could she do it solo? Now that she could use chi, it seemed possible. If she ended up bumping into someone much stronger than her, then even if she couldn’t win in a fight, she could probably still outrun them.

Running into someone or something stronger than her was the scariest thing about taking something like this on. Usually, surveyors would move in a group so they could protect each other, but the more people working on the job, the less money you got individually. Which was why Fressa wanted to do it solo if she could.

Given its location, there likely weren’t any big monsters. If there were, someone would have detected them because of the sounds or vibrations or other various factors. No one had reported anything of the sort, so she was pretty sure she would be safe on that front.

If it was just human enemies, then so long as they weren’t as strong as Nia, she’d be fine. Even if she couldn’t win against them, again, she had the confidence she could outrun them.

It seemed more efficient than hunting, and both jobs came with risks anyway. The wounds left on her heart from Lynette’s ruthless, “You really aren’t suited to this,” and, “You just get in the way,” and, “Your chest is way too big,” and, “You’re just a useless bimbo,” were still raw and aching.

Okay, she might have been exaggerating some of it, but the point still stood. Knowing that people really thought she was getting in the way made her much more reluctant to go on hunting trips with them.

“Maybe I’ll give it a try.” She’d barely been contributing to the billion krams. If this was her opportunity to make some good money, then she had to take it.

“Gonna go for it? Be careful of the ghosts, then,” Anzel said.

“Ghosts? Oh yeah, there were rumors about that, weren’t there?” And quite recent ones at that. It was a common tale when it came to locations like sewers that were dark and damp and barely had people around.

Such rumors were so common that it barely bothered Fressa.

However, if it was a rumor spread by someone specifically to try and keep

people away, that meant it was possible that there really was someone nefarious living there.

“I’ll be careful, don’t worry. So? What’s your cut of the reward?”

“Hey, at least call it a brokerage fee. If you mess up, I’m the one that has to take responsibility, you know. I’m taking an amount that’s appropriate for the risks.”

“And the number?”

“Two mil.”

“Wait. Are you telling me the original reward is five million krams? You’re getting a pretty sizable chunk!”

“You don’t have to take the job. I can easily find someone else who’ll work for even less. This wasn’t even something I intended to offer you in the first place.”

“Wow, so you’re *that* willing to steal from your friends?”

“‘Friends’? Whose ‘friend’ do you mean? As far as I’m concerned, you’re just some asshole who got me drunk, stole my cash, and then dumped me in the trash. *Three times.*”

“Oh shit.” Fressa was suddenly much more interested in returning to her barmaid duties. She didn’t think she’d end up making him remember such a stupid memory. If she opened her big mouth again, he’d take off even more for sure.

“I’ll start tomorrow. Don’t give the job to anyone else.”

That was all she said before she cut off the conversation with her old acquaintance.

“That about sums it up. Doubt you need much of a detailed explanation.”

The next day, Fressa met up with Nastine at their usual café and discussed the job over breakfast. He’d given her a map, and quickly briefed her on the task. She’d participated in a survey of the waterways once before, so she didn’t need much explained again.

“So to confirm, all I need to do is check the pathways. I can leave any homeless, but I should chase out any thugs. If I see people who specifically look like they’re part of an organized crime ring, I should leave them alone and report back to you. That sound about right?”

“Yup, same as always.”

In other words, they were the usual routine checks. Homeless would always gather in the waterways and they posed no threat. Thugs, on the other hand, were liable to form their own gangs, so they had to be taken out right away. On the off chance that some organization was using the waterways as a hideout, she needed to figure out their identity and then they would be dealt with by either Nastine or someone above him.

“Sure you’re good by yourself?”

“It makes it easier for me to move around.”

Fressa fully intended to handle this as quickly as possible. The job was a simple case of confirming the state of the waterways and dealing with any troublemakers as appropriate. Since they wanted her to scan the whole area, they naturally weren’t asking for her to detect any smaller issues.

If she could get info from anyone living down there, her investigation would go much faster. The underground waterways were large and convoluted, but five days should’ve been more than enough for her.

Fressa stood up when she finished her food. “Thanks for breakfast. I’ll get going.”

“Hey, I didn’t say I was gonna pay for you.” Regardless, the generous Nastine did just that, letting Fressa quickly go on her way.

There were tons of entrances to the underground in Altoire. One of them was in a small hut built specifically for that purpose. In other words, it was an official entrance, and that meant it was usually locked. Knowing someone would be going down for a survey, though, the door had been unlocked in advance. Generally, only those hired by the country were allowed in. The capital’s sewers all ran underground and converged in one place.

Fressa wasn’t all that knowledgeable on the specifics of how it all worked, but

she knew that apparently, wastewater would pass through, build up in some large tank, and then magic would purify the water before sending it out into the ocean. Some sort of magic treatment was also in place to break down human waste into harmless substances—it wasn't left to just go through untouched. Thanks to that, Altoire's underground waterways were surprisingly clean.

There were stone pathways on either side of the tunnel, with the wastewater slowly flowing down the middle, continuing off into the endless darkness. Fressa chose a side and continued down the uneven path.

"Smells as bad as ever here." Fressa's face scrunched up after she climbed down the ladder. There wasn't much contaminated water passing through, but there were other smells in the air. Any monsters or animals that died here would've been left to rot and decompose. In fact, not just monsters and animals, but possibly humans too. Strange, unidentifiable smells like that were filling the air.

The sun didn't shine down here. If anything went down, no one aboveground would ever know. It didn't help that there was no way to get fresh air down here. You could practically see the dampness in the air.

Fressa stood there for a bit as she took in her surroundings. Once her eyes got used to the dim light of the manastones fitted to the walls, she began walking again. The light from the manastones wasn't the most reliable, so the place was still dark, but they were bright enough for her to see where she was going.

"Things would go so much faster if I could just find someone to ask," she muttered, walking at a brisk pace as she referenced the map. Dust was starting to build up on the ground; even mice apparently hadn't passed through here lately.

Well, it was fine. It wasn't exactly a part of the waterway that people thought to sneak in, so she'd just have to continue doing things the old-fashioned way.

"That's about halfway."

The royal capital was split into eighteen districts and therefore, so were its waterways.

Fressa was on day three of her survey, referencing the map as she made her way through. She'd been getting faster as she got the hang of things, and so far, everything was going smoothly. Beyond the unpleasant smell and environment, there had been no real problems.

Both fortunately and unfortunately, no thugs had sneaked their way in—it was a pretty boring affair. There were some homeless scattered about, but not very many, and none of them had any interesting insight. They were still in that winter chill that shortly preceded spring, and that meant the waterways were quite cold. It wasn't the best place to hang around or sleep. Regardless, the locals hadn't seen anything especially out of the ordinary.

If things kept going this smoothly, she'd be done by tomorrow night.

But she wouldn't be so lucky.

"There's, like, some ghosts or somethin' down there."

During her survey, she ended up talking with a pair of homeless, two slightly dirty old men. When she gave them some change and asked if they'd seen anything out of the ordinary, they mentioned the ghosts.

"Ghosts?" Anzel had warned her about such rumors and she'd been keeping them in mind, but she hadn't thought someone would actually bring it up.

"Yeah, there was this weird white floaty thing goin' *whoosh* down the path. Gave me the shivers, it did."

"Same. It's freezin'."

"I wasn't shiverin' 'cause of the cold, ya dolt."

Fressa considered this. *A ghost, huh?* She'd thought it was one of those typical baseless rumors when she'd heard it at the Shadow Rat, but now that she was hearing about it in the place itself, the degree of reliability shot right up.

Reality of ghosts aside, it was much more likely that they'd seen *something* that looked like one at the very least. These homeless men had no reason to lie unless they'd been incentivized to tell that exact story.

“That’s why I was against stayin’ in a creepy place like this. It’s cold, it stinks, it’s all humid, and there ain’t even a single mouse. There’s nothin’ to eat here.”

“I’m hungry too.”

“You’re the one that brought us here!”

It seemed unlikely that these two were working on someone’s orders. They would have been more wound up had they been planted here to fool people. Whatever the case, the only thing she could do was check things out for herself.

“Where’d you see this ghost?”

They pointed toward the tenth area. She hadn’t checked in that direction yet.

“Thanks for the tip. If you find yourself with nowhere to stay, head to the warehouse district. You’ll find a lot of people in the same situation as you.” It would be a little troublesome if they starved or froze or drowned to death here, so she gave them some rough directions.

There were no slums in the royal capital of Altoire. The underworld took in those without a place to stay, especially since some of them were job brokers aiming to cut out the middleman. She couldn’t promise the men that they would be treated well, but at the very least, they’d have a roof over their heads and food to eat.

She parted ways with the homeless men and continued. For now, she’d truck on with her investigation.

It was now day four of her investigation. She’d gone all out the day before and finished up to the seventeenth district. There was only one left: district ten, the area where the ghosts had been sighted. She’d left it for last since she knew there was actually something to investigate and there was no telling how long the search would take.

She was sure by this point that there had to be *something* there, it was just a matter of what. Finding an actual ghostly presence wouldn’t be so strange, but that would likely be the least interesting outcome. Surveys were frequent enough that no big ghosts like a lich would’ve had time to manifest.

The other possibility was that someone was posing as a ghost. That seemed more probable, and was also more of a threat.

“Getting a little excited about how this is going to end.”

And so, Fressa began her investigation of the last area.

“Now, what do we have here?”

Thanks to the dirt on the ground, the stagnant air, and a woman’s instincts, she could practically feel something unusual about the space. She crouched down to further examine the ground, finding disturbances in the light coating of dust and the dirt that couldn’t be seen well at a cursory glance.

“Three people...?”

There were footsteps. Three different types, and big enough that they were likely men. With the scattered nature of the markings, they seemed to have been frequently coming in and out of the area.

Three people wasn’t enough for an organized crime group, so they must have been a trio carrying out jobs together. Being so sneaky in a place like this reeked of trouble, especially if they were trying so hard not to be seen that they were mistaken for ghosts. Then again, she couldn’t rule out the possibility that they were part of a much bigger group that was only sending the three of them down here.

“Heh heh.” In any case, she’d caught the scent of crime, and that meant she’d caught the scent of money. Her job was simply to do a rough survey of the waterways and then report back, but surely it would be fine for her to take the initiative to deal with something so small it wasn’t even worth reporting. She was saving them the hassle; what problem could there possibly be? She’d remain adamant she’d done it from the kindness of her heart.

That said, if she found anything shiny while she was taking down evil, she may slip it into her pocket.

“All right!” After doing her own assessment and taking a little peek further in, she decided to pull back for now.

Fressa returned to the waterways later that evening—

“Which way?”

—with Anzel in tow.

“Straight ahead.”

It didn't take much persuasion to get him on board. Nowadays, Anzel appeared to be an upright citizen as the bartender of the Shadow Rat, but moments like this made it apparent that at his root, his heart remained in the underworld. He was the kind to immediately jump on an easy profit.

“Just to remind you, I'm not paying you for this.”

“I know. Even if we split the reward money, it'd all end up in the same place anyway. Whether you or me, we'd put it all toward the billion krams, right?”

He was correct.

“You're being such a good boy for them,” she couldn't help but tease. This man was a contrarian through and through; he ordinarily wasn't the type to just obediently listen to whatever someone told him to do.

“Yeah, 'cause I'd rather not find out what would happen if I wasn't. If we don't make that billion krams, I'm outta here.”

“Well, can't fault you for that. I'd do the same.”

Both Anzel and Fressa had agreed to never anger Nia Liston. That was practically their number one priority.

They started walking down the path to district ten.

“What's their numbers lookin' like?”

“Three at minimum. Don't know how many more. It seems like they're able to get aboveground from here.”

“What, did they open a hole or something?”

“Probably. The tenth district is quite an affluent residential area, so I think it's possible there's some mastermind on the surface.”

“I see. And that's why you called me here.”

“Pretty much.”

She could handle three opponents somehow, maybe even a little more than that. But if the number got much bigger, she might find herself in a bit of trouble, so just in case, she’d consulted with Anzel. If he was interested, great. If he seemed reluctant, she’d have tried to negotiate, but if she failed, she would’ve tried to find someone else.

“What’s your thoughts on their group?” Anzel asked.

“They’re probably foreigners. They’re a bit too good to be random thugs, too sneaky. They might be from some foreign army or mafia. It also seems pretty likely they have an informant within Altoire.”

“Doesn’t this sound like way more hassle than it’s worth...?”

“We’ll deal with it when the time comes. For now, it’s thieving ti— I mean, it’s time to go check them out.”

“Hey, it’d be worth grabbing anything that looks valuable before reporting back.”

Glad we’re on the same page!

They found the footprints of the three men pretending to be ghosts going in and out of the tenth district waterways again, and followed the trail until they discovered a wall covered by a sheet. It had a sign in front of it that read “BEWARE OF WALL COLLAPSE” as if the wall had been destroyed in some sort of accident, but it was clearly just a decoy.

Naturally, when they pulled back the cover, they found a thin wall made of planks.

“Gimme a second.” Anzel handed the sheet to Fressa and then moved the planks aside. Behind them was a corridor that an adult could easily pass through if they ducked. “Down here, right?”

“Yup.”

The two of them showed no hesitation as they entered the tunnel. There was an open area not too far in that had been dug out by an organization that had

taken control of the place in the past, who then used it as their base.

That organization had already been dealt with. There had been plans to destroy this space with them, but after all the effort put into building it, the city decided to consider if there was some other way they could use it. There were quite a lot of areas like that scattered about the waterways.

Fressa wasn't really sure how those men had found this area, but apparently, they were making very good use of it. There were tons of wooden crates stacked inside—each one stuffed with smuggled goods.

"Whew, what've they got?" Anzel asked.

"It just looked like a bunch of metal parts." That was as far as Fressa had investigated earlier that morning. She'd pulled back after discovering it.

"What kind of parts?"

The crates were all neatly piled up in rows. There was a good number of them, roughly two hundred or so. Fressa wasn't sure if they all had the same contents, though.

"See for yourself."

Not far from where they came in was a box that Fressa had busted open when she came to investigate earlier. It was still broken, so it seemed no one had noticed yet. Anzel peeked inside himself and crossed his arms.

"They look like skiff parts."

"For skiffs?" Apparently the crates were full of parts for small airships that could fit one or two people. "These are totally smuggled goods, aren't they?" Fressa asked.

"No doubt about it."

These crates had been secretly carried to a dark place underground that wasn't even marked on a map—of course they were smuggled goods. The men had somehow gotten them into the country without the authorities knowing and stored them all down there.

"They're smuggling *skiff parts*?"

The confusing part now was the goods themselves. Smuggled goods tended to be scarce, expensive, and illegal to import. The risk of sneaking past the eyes of the law was dangerous enough that the money to be made had to be worth the hassle.

And yet, the goods before them were parts for a *skiff*. There was nothing rare or expensive about them. Would they really be so profitable?

“I can’t guarantee it, but I’m pretty sure that’s what these are. I guess they must be pretty valuable...?” Anzel replied with confusion in his tone.

“Hmm... What should we do? Should we take some with us?” Fressa had been excited thinking they would be worth something, but knowing they were nothing special, she was disappointed. Maybe they were worth a lot, but at the end of the day, they were just airship parts. There was only so much she’d be able to sell them for.

Given the number of crates as well, and how heavy each of them was, carrying them out with just the two of them would be tough. Would the profits be worth the effort?

“It does seem like there was a reason for ’em to go this far, either ’cause they’re contraband or ’cause they’re the latest model. At the very least, it’s real likely these aren’t just regular parts.”

“I guess so.”

The smugglers had been gradually sneaking in skiff parts while pretending to be ghosts. If they’d done it in bulk, the authorities would’ve noticed them, so they’d had no choice but to do it bit by bit. The fact the crates were here at all meant they weren’t goods that could be traded on the regular market. The problem was that Anzel and Fressa couldn’t actually calculate their value. Fressa couldn’t imagine these crates would go for very much.

“I know you boys like your airships and your skiffs, but I don’t have a single clue about them.”

“Hey, you do realize I’m older than you, right?” Anzel tested the weight of one of the boxes and then placed it back down. “They’re quite heavy and bulky, to boot. I could probably only carry three at once.”

In which case...

“Should we just end this quick, then?”

Right now, they were undercover—infiltrating this area without the members of the smuggling ring knowing. In other words, if they took down everyone tied to this enterprise, they could completely take over the business. All Anzel and Fressa would have to do was hire some people once they were done here. There were plenty of ways to more easily transport the crates.

That was just what business in the underworld was like. If you showed any weakness, your business would be stolen from you. If you weren't strong enough, you simply wouldn't survive. If you didn't like how it worked, you were better off abiding by the law and becoming a merchant on the surface.

Evil would always be swallowed by a greater evil.

“I'd prefer to make our decision after seein' what these guys are like, but there's no time.”

Nastine had given them five days, and today was the last day. If they reported the smuggling ring to Nastine, he would then report it to his superiors, who would handle it how they wanted—with no reward for Fressa and Anzel.

Ideally, Fressa and Anzel would get the three million krams for the investigation and also nab the smuggled goods to make some extra cash. They'd arrived at a mountain of treasure—even if they had no idea how much it was really worth. No resident of the underworld would have seen this and left it.

“Where's their entry point?”

“Over there. There's a ladder.”

“Then let's check out what's above here before we make our move. I wanna see if we stand a chance—”

“I won't allow you to go any farther.”

The moment the strange noise interrupted Anzel, he and Fressa immediately reacted. They moved in unison before they could even register what words were said, hiding behind separate crates. They both crouched, heightened their senses, and searched the surroundings.

Where had that noise...that *voice* come from? It had been a low male voice, but they couldn't detect anyone's presence. There shouldn't have been anyone there but the two of them.

The tension grew as time stretched on with no answers.

"You're that rat from earlier."

This time, they were able to register the noise as words. "The rat from earlier"? That likely referred to Fressa. She must have been discovered that morning after all.

Only one possibility came to mind:

"He must be a magician," Anzel said.

"His voice is coming from the ceiling."

The voice was reverberating, which made his exact location hard to pinpoint, but it was definitely coming from above. This man was likely using Farsight, a magic that allowed one to see outside of their usual range of vision, and Transmission, a magic that allowed one to project sound.

Magic wasn't so common in modern times. During times of war, it was a factor that gave strength to the common people, but that was now a thing of the distant past.

All people were born with mana within their bodies, but that did not mean anyone was guaranteed to be able to use magic. Many spells had been lost to time, and lessons were expensive. Even if one *were* to learn magic, what would they even use it for? There was also a theory that a general depletion of mana had resulted in a decrease of the number of people who could use magic.

And then there was the problem of how magic was established within each country. As far as Altoire's magician circles were concerned, it was on its way out. Part of the reason magivision was struggling to spread was because it had been a long time since magic was last a part of everyday life. Contrary to Altoire, however, there were apparently countries like the Noble Kingdom of Harvelheim which still regularly used and taught magic.

Long story short: Magicians were a pain in the ass. To the inexperienced

fighter, a magician was like a mystery box where anything could jump out at any time. It could be fire, it could be ice, it could be something else entirely—even something lethal. The fighter’s guard had to be kept up at all times.

Now that the magician had spotted them, though, they couldn’t move. Their opponent wasn’t in the room with them, and that meant they couldn’t effectively judge the danger. The quickest and most decisive way to deal with a magician was to take down the man himself. Making an unplanned retreat was too risky; the magician could easily fire magic at their running backs.

Fressa silenced her breathing and searched her surroundings.

“Leave. Now. I’m willing to let you go this time.”

Giving us a warning? How kind. But Fressa and Anzel had both lived in a world of deceive or be deceived for so long that they were constantly searching for the true meaning behind one’s words.

“Let’s go.”

“You got it.”

Warnings were words used to chase off intruders. But behind those words was the assumption that the speaker was unprepared to fight and didn’t want to engage in battle.

They couldn’t afford to heed the magician’s warning. If they pulled back here as he wanted, that tower of treasure may disappear, never to be found again. Fressa and Anzel weren’t about to give him the time to take away their prize.

Rather than retreating, Fressa and Anzel ventured farther inside. The magician sensed their movements and spat an insult in irritation, *“You fools.”*

At that, several of the wooden crates shattered. The skiff parts had broken through the boxes and were flying right toward Fressa and Anzel. There must have been over a hundred pieces, each one heavy and durable. If any of those hit them, it would definitely hurt, and it didn’t help that there were so many projectiles.

“Anzel, I’m counting on you!” Fressa let out a roar as she relentlessly charged forward, dodging the metal parts flying her way.

Stopping here would have been a bad idea; they'd both become easy targets. In which case, one of them would be the decoy so the other could move freely; that was their best chance at survival.

Fressa didn't particularly want to play the role of the decoy. She was the kind who liked to keep moving when in a desperate situation. Staying still wasn't her style.

"You asshole! You're payin' me back for this later!" For all his complaints, Anzel had come to the same conclusion. Fressa's swift speed made her the better of the two to go ahead, so it was only natural he would become the decoy. He was also aware that this was their best available option—that didn't mean he liked it. They'd come here together and now he was stuck with all the danger.

"How about some Bakaña? Aged ten years!" she shouted back.

"Five bottles!"

"Three!"

"Four!"

"Deal!"

Negotiations complete. *You greedy little jerk*, Fressa bitterly thought to herself as she dashed up the ladder, leaving behind Anzel and her expensive new debt.

Anzel's immediate thought was that this was way easier than he expected. The metal parts were relentless in their attack and yet they barely felt like a threat. He wasn't sure if it was because he could use chi now, but he almost felt like they were going in slow motion.

In reality, they weren't moving anywhere near that slowly, and if any of them hit, his bones would definitely break. Yet dodging them was easy, and he could even deflect them with his palm. He even had the leeway to consider how to strike to avoid breaking them—it would be a waste of the goods if he did. If he kept them in one piece, he could sell them off later.



The metal parts were focusing on Anzel as if the magician had determined that he was the easier target over the swiftly weaving Fressa. That was fine by Anzel, though. It meant he was a successful decoy.

It became apparent that this magician wasn't very used to battle if he fell for such an obvious trick. At least it made things easier for Fressa.

"Don't get so cocky!" Apparently, the magician did feel like he was being treated lightly.

"Huh? Holy shit... You're kidding me."

The metal parts started gathering together. It took a moment for Anzel to recognize what he was looking at, but gradually, it took shape. It was a skiff.

These parts can automatically assemble? Several skiffs formed before his eyes, and suddenly everything made sense.

"That's why they were smuggled in."

They were skiffs that could be broken down for easier storage and then automatically put back together. Something like that would definitely sell. Hell, even Anzel wanted one of his own—not that he'd have a way to use it.

It irritated him to admit Fressa had been right: men really did love this kind of thing no matter their age.

The skiffs dove for Anzel. Not only were they big, but they were also heavy. If any of those hunks of metal hit him, he'd be a goner for sure.

In which case, the only option was to simply not get hit.

"Don't treat them so roughly." It might've been a strange thing to say to his enemy, but Anzel really wanted the magician to make sure the skiffs didn't hit the walls or the floors or each other. Anzel really wanted him to make sure he didn't damage or break them.

After making it to the top of the tall ladder, Fressa kicked open a metal hatch.

"Intruder!"

She emerged into a dimly lit room with five burly men ready to attack,

wielding wooden bats and other shoddy weapons. A gathering like this was nothing to her anymore. She might not have known her opponents, but she could tell that they were no stronger than your average thug. She could've taken them down easily in the past, but with chi at her disposal, she didn't even have to put her back into it.

After taking them down without even breaking a sweat, she took a look around.

"Is this...a warehouse?" Given the decent size of the room and the haphazardly placed tools and other junk, it seemed likely. There was no furniture, so it didn't appear to be the inside of a home, at least. The tenth district of the underground waterways was right under quite an affluent residential district, so she should've popped out somewhere around there...

No, there was no time for theorizing. Anzel was surprisingly resilient, so he would likely be fine for a while, but if she didn't hurry and take the magician down, he'd have some very choice words for her later.

Now that they'd been attacked like this, they'd definitely been caught, so there was no point in trying to be roundabout and sneaky anymore. It was time for her to make a frontal assault.

Given the scale of the smuggling and how gradually the mystery men had been carrying out their operations, it was hard to think there were many people around. At least, not here.

Finding a door, she opened it and was immediately greeted by the outside. More specifically, she'd found herself in someone's garden. There was an outer wall, cutting it off from the rest of the surroundings.

She'd gone from the smelly underground to a dim warehouse to the outside where the evening was only starting to dim. The garden was well-maintained, so it was hard to imagine this was a gathering area for thugs.

Did that mean the mastermind was the owner of this house?

No, I already said this isn't the time for this.

Now that she had confirmed there was no one in the vicinity, Fressa quickly moved toward the house. The commotion hadn't yet spread to the other side of

the wall, so she'd much prefer if she could finish things inside the property. It would be the worst if the authorities found her—they'd strip everything from her according to the law.

She boldly whipped open the door to the house—and was immediately greeted by bright red.

"Oh, crap."

It was fire. Fire blazing hot was coming right at her.

The magician had cast Fireball. Fressa had been anticipating a surprise attack, obviously, but she hadn't been expecting the sheer size of it.

It was massive. It was so big that there was no space to dodge it in the entryway of the house. She couldn't afford to dodge it anyway. If she was right, that fire would explode once it hit its target. If she didn't take the hit, it would explode right in the middle of the residential district and turn it into a sea of fire. That in and of itself wasn't something she cared much about, but if such a dramatic incident occurred, the higher-ups would instantly know what Fressa had tried to do, no doubt about it.

She could probably come up with some convincing excuses, but Nastine would definitely use an incident like that to cut her pay. Worst-case scenario, he'd forfeit her part of the reward entirely, *and* she wouldn't get any of the skiff parts from underground.

And so, she could not afford to dodge here, but she obviously couldn't eat the blast either. If that hit her, she'd be burned to ashes.

Having all that run through her head in a split second, Fressa came to her decision.

She removed her belt, changing it into the secret whip she had stashed away. She'd been training to use this Technique, but not once had she succeeded. It was slowly taking shape and she could tell she was starting to get the hang of it, but none of her attempts had been quite right.

Now, though, she had no choice but to make it work.

Chi Fist: Rupture—when Fressa had asked Nia if there were any Techniques

that used weapons, that was what she taught her. It was a Technique that was difficult to learn, but so long as you had a blunt weapon, you could use it. It put emphasis on sheer destructive power, a weapon version of Roaring Thunder, the Technique that Gandolph had been joyfully training.

And then Nia had given a demonstration.

Fressa had asked if a whip—far from what would normally be perceived as a blunt weapon—could still be used for such a Technique, and Nia had shown her just that. What was essentially a simple leather belt cracked stones and shattered glass jars; it practically destroyed the air. Even though Nia hadn't touched anything directly, a terrifying destructive sound had rumbled through the air.

If that Technique could part even the air, then maybe she could destroy the nonsolid fire in front of her.

Nia had said back then that she should focus all her power and speed into the moment the tip of the whip flipped back after throwing it.

Rupture. Fressa had not once succeeded with the Technique, but she was positive she was close. In which case, she should have been able to use it here. She would believe in her own potential—she would believe in the way she was always strongest during the real thing.

Charging her chi, she let out a sharp breath, and flicked her whip down. The moment it touched the encroaching Fireball, she pulled back with all her strength.

THWACK!

That sound! That's what I heard when Nia showed me! Except things didn't go quite so smoothly.

"Ow, that's hot!"

The fire scattered in all directions, and the moment a part of it touched her, she instinctively dropped to the floor. She'd succeeded in destroying the Fireball, but it hadn't been a clean dispersal, resulting in some of it sparking onto her. But at least it was a much better outcome than an explosion. The spark only lightly touched her—it hadn't even caused a burn. She'd accidentally

charred a bit of the entranceway, but thankfully, it hadn't escalated into a full-blown fire.

"Huh?! Damn it!"

Fressa came back to her senses when she heard a man's voice. All manner of emotions were swirling around inside of her at having escaped danger through the success of her first Rupture, but first things first, she needed to catch that magician.

"Don't follow me!"

The magician was down the other end of the burnt entrance hall. She'd been expecting a typical magician with black robes and all, but instead, he was a regular young man around her age with no interesting features to speak of. After shouting at Fressa upon seeing her survive his Fireball attack, he ran farther down the hall. Naturally, Fressa gave chase—she couldn't afford to let him get away. She chased after him quickly but carefully, making sure to keep her senses heightened just in case.

"Whoopsie-daisies!" As she ran, one of the doors from the side of the corridor burst off just as Fressa was passing it, clearly aimed right at her, which had entirely been within Fressa's predictions. The fact that she had made it through the Fireball had made the magician even more wary of her. Running in plain sight so your enemy would chase after you and then setting a trap along the way was a classic move.

After nimbly dodging the door, she peeked inside the room and saw a woman holding a staff standing there. "Oh? Are you a civilian?" she asked. The woman was around the same age as Fressa as well, if not a little younger. Her face was pale, and the tip of her staff was shaking as she aimed it at Fressa. She clearly wasn't used to combat or violent situations in general.

I guess there were two magicians all along.

"Wanna fight? Do I have the okay to beat you up?" She thought it was worth asking first. If the girl had looked ready and raring to go, she'd beat her up without question, but she clearly looked scared.

"N-No way!" The girl violently shook her head.

“Okay. In that case, don’t move, okay? If you leave here, you’ll get hurt.” Leaving her with that warning, Fressa left the room and chased after the man again.

Neither of the magicians seemed to be lacking in strength, but they also weren’t used to this kind of situation; it was so obvious they didn’t have combat experience. But whatever, now that she was this far, there was no turning back.

“You done?”

After that, Fressa managed to catch up with the male magician, beat him unconscious, and capture him without the man putting up much of a fight. Dragging him along the ground, she had met back up with the trembling girl and brought them both back to the warehouse. Thankfully, the fire in the entranceway had burned out, leaving only the marks. She was thankful for that, as she’d wanted to avoid a fire at all costs.

When she returned to the warehouse, Anzel was there smoking as he waited for her. The attacks from down below must have stopped when she made contact with the magician, so Anzel probably decided to follow after her.

“These two are the magicians. That seems to be everyone.”

Of course, it could be the case that they had coconspirators who weren’t stationed in their house. If they were smuggling from outside the country, then it was more than likely that they had foreign allies.

Right now, Fressa and Anzel had no idea of the magicians’ background, how big their organization was, or if people in power were involved in all of this. But maybe they wouldn’t need to dig that far.

“Who’s in charge of you scamps?” Anzel asked the trembling woman. She turned to look at the man that Fressa was dragging. “Him, huh? He’s a magician, right?”

“Yup.” Fressa nodded, before looking at the woman herself. “You don’t have to be so scared. We just wanna make a deal.”

“A d-deal?”

“Mm-hmm. Our goal is money. In other words, we want everything you’ve got stored underground. If you give it all to us, we’ll let you go scot-free. We won’t do anything more to you or try to dig into your circumstances.”

Handling this quietly was just as preferable for Anzel and Fressa. Killing the magicians wouldn’t net them any money, and handing them over to the guys up top would get them the tiniest cut of the reward at best. Worst-case scenario, the higher-ups would just take *everything* off their hands.

Picking a fight with a foreign organization was just asking for trouble, so getting any more involved sounded like a pain. If foreigners wanted to gain control of the Altoire underworld, they were welcome to try and raid it. Anzel and Fressa wouldn’t even need to get involved in the fight—that’d turn all the dark corners of the country into their enemies.

“In case you don’t appreciate this, you’re getting off light, you know. Being able to buy off your blunder with money is a cheap price to pay round this neck of the woods. You failed at smuggling in the goods, you failed at killing the eyewitnesses, you’re breaking the laws of this country, and you’ll all die the minute the mafia learn of what you’ve been up to. I’ll be nice and won’t ask you anything about who you’re affiliated with. If you abandon everything here and return to your country, we’ll pretend none of this ever happened.”

Honestly, Fressa would have been happiest if that’s what they did. It prevented any trouble later, and she could get her hands on some valuable goods. This was the most profitable solution for the pair.

“At the end of the day, you and your smuggling ring are so pathetic you got stomped by two small baddies. You’d have failed even if we hadn’t stumbled upon you.”

“Nice work.”

On the night of the fifth day of the survey, Nastine met up with Fressa at the Shadow Rat. She returned the map and reported what she had seen down there. Nothing she had to say was confidential, so it was okay for them to talk in such a public area. The only thing she had to report was that the tenth district’s wall had been *mysteriously* broken.

“A wall collapse, huh? Anything else?”

“Nope, not particularly. There were barely even any homeless because of how cold it is down there.”

“Got it. You’ll get your money in the coming days.”

After that small exchange, Fressa returned to her work. She and Anzel had already hauled away the smuggled goods, and the magicians were likely on an airship home by now. She didn’t know their names or their smuggling ring. She didn’t even know what country they were from.

This was for the best. Fressa didn’t care for getting involved with anything troublesome or learning too much about things that weren’t her business. Her goal was always money at the end of the day. Nothing more, nothing less.

All that was left was to sell off the goods as soon as they got the chance. She didn’t know how valuable they were, but she had high hopes. According to Anzel, they were the latest model of self-assembling skiff. She’d never heard of such technology before, so surely it would sell for a lot.

Hopefully, this would make up for the times she hadn’t gone out hunting with the rest. For now, this would do.

Surely once she became more proficient at manipulating her chi, she’d be able to take down the big monsters too. Nia was able to do it, after all.

Afterword

I have fallen down the rabbit hole of figurines. I regret underestimating this world.

Hello, Umikaze Minamino here. I am writing this afterword at the end of February 2024.

We've made it to volume 5. Talking about a fifth volume, if you think about it like...

Actually, as much as I want to keep this bit going, I don't have much space this time, so I'm going to move on to my thanks:

First, to my illustrator, Katana-sensei. Thank you as always for your wonderful art. Yet again, the cover art is wonderful. I'm sure all the fans of young girls out there raised an eyebrow when they caught sight of it on the shelves.

Kodai-sensei, thank you for always making the manga so fun. The manga has now reached volume 3. Lynokis turning into Leeno was incredible to see. There's lots of good moments, but I think that's one of the best ones. Check it out if you haven't already!

Thank you to S-san, my editor, for all the work they had to do for this volume. A lot of this volume is original to the light novel. As it turned out, there weren't enough pages with just the content from the webnovel. It's scary when you realize you don't have enough—to me at least. I began worrying that I wouldn't be able to write enough, but then it turned out my hand just flowed once I started. It was a relief. Both of us were in trouble for a bit there.

Thank you to everyone else involved in the publishing of my books, as well.

And finally, to all of my readers. We've made it to volume 5 thanks to all of you. As I wrote earlier, this volume has a lot of content original to the light novel. I'd always wanted to dig a little more into some of the characters, so as the author, I'm quite pleased. If you're all happy with it, I'm also happy.

I've been blessed with the opportunity to release volume 6. That's six

volumes. Talking about a sixth volume, if you think about it like... Well, I hope I have the space to do this then.

See you next time!

Bonus Short Stories

The Barmaid's Pleading

"We still have a bit of time until curfew."

I'd just finished my magivision work for the day. Recording right after classes was always tiring, but it was the only time we had available.

The Liston broadcasting station had finally established a branch in the royal capital, so it had become easier for us to work down here. At first, I had considered it an exciting development, but then I realized it meant my list of duties had only gotten bigger. It was my family's business so I wouldn't complain too much. I'd already accepted my fate, but it was still exhausting.

Usually I would finish recording and go straight back to the dorm, but today I still had some time before I had to be back. Today's session had gone so smoothly that it was still bright out by the time we were done, even with the short days of winter.

"Take care, Nia! Nice work today!"

The production crew saw me off, and then I looked at Lynette to see what she would say—Lynokis was out adventuring at the moment, so my brother's attendant was with me.

"Let's go home, Young Mistress."

That would have been the correct thing to do. But I was now faced with rare free time outside the campus grounds. Going home right away felt like a waste.

"I'd like to go see how Anzel and Fressa are doing." If I didn't go now, I had no idea when the next time would be.

"You really shouldn't, but...okay. Be quick, though." Even Lynette must have realized how rare this opportunity was, so she didn't try to argue against it.

I told Lynette to wait a little ways away as I went into the back alley alone. None of the thugs loitering around the dim area dared speak to me or even make eye contact. It made me a little sad, honestly.

“Could you move?” I asked the thug blocking the entranceway as he had a smoke.

“Huh? You wanna say that aga— EEK?! Deepest apologies!”

Hey, do you have to squeal like that? Even I can feel hurt, you know. Had I beaten this guy up before...?

I didn’t have much time so I stopped lingering on it.

When I opened the door, the familiar barmaid immediately noticed me.

“Lily! Welcome, welcome.”

It was good old Fressa. Seemed she had a shift today. Even though it was still too early to be considered evening, the Shifty Shadow Rat was bustling. So many deadbeats were getting drunk while the sun was still out. I was jealous— I mean, how terrible. Truly despicable.

The whole place went silent when they realized who had entered, and everyone at the counter scattered like little spiders. This was normal.

“Yo, Lily.”

Anzel was bartending today too. All of my students frequently went out adventuring, including Lynokis and Lynette, so I wasn’t always sure what their schedules were. Our arrangements meant that they could all make money at their own pace. Apparently, Anzel had hired a new bartender to cover for him when he went out, but I still hadn’t met them. Really, I’d have loved to get the chance to at least introduce myself, but it was hard when I had so little free time. I had no idea if I would ever get the opportunity.

“Hello, Anzel. Strongest alcohol you have, please.”

“Your usual juice? Comin’ right up.”

“Yes. Strong enough that it burns my throat.”

As I took a seat at the counter, Anzel began chopping the fruit.

“Been a little while since you popped by,” Fressa remarked as she sat down next to me.

“It certainly has. I have so little free time right now it’s unbearable even for me. I need a drink to get me through the day.”

“Oof, isn’t that relatable? So even kids find themselves wanting to turn to the bottle sometimes.”

Fressa likely thought that I was joking, but I was being serious. I was more than aware that I couldn’t actually drink alcohol, though...

“So? Why’re you here?” Anzel asked. “Doubt you have much time to be chattin’ with us.” He swiftly slid the freshly pressed juice in front of me.

“Not any particular reason. I just came to see how you two were doing.” Their faces instantly tensed. In their minds, me coming to see how they were doing meant I was coming to evaluate the results of their training, to see how their chi manipulation was coming along, but in truth, I wasn’t there for anything so serious. I just wanted to make sure they hadn’t hit any roadblocks or plateaued in their improvement. We hadn’t been able to meet in so long, after all.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything I need to address though. Keep training as you have been.” The stability of both Anzel’s and Fressa’s chi had increased since the last time I saw them. In my opinion, they were doing well.

Anzel released the breath he was holding. “Nothin’ makes me more nervous nowadays than this.”

“Same here,” Fressa chuckled.

“Nervous? But why?”

“I get the heebie-jeebies every time I imagine what would happen if you thought we weren’t doin’ good enough.”

“I wouldn’t do anything.” Or would I? I guess I might put them through some harsh training.

“Really? You won’t go ‘You fail. Now *die*’ and cut off our heads?” Fressa asked.

“No, of course not.” But...I still might’ve subjected them to training so harsh

that they would end up wishing that was the punishment I had gone for.

“Say, Lily, I want to ask a favor.”

After we’d been chatting for a while, Fressa suddenly started leaning towards me with a pleading look on her face. *Oh my, what’s about to happen here?*

“You’d be willing to teach little ol’ me a Technique, wouldn’t you?” she whispered into my ear. Even knowing her tone was laced with poison, I couldn’t help but perceive it as sweet and seductive. It was a serpentine whisper that would tickle any man’s instincts. Fressa had a pretty face and she knew it, so there were many men who fell for her wiles.

“I’d love to learn some as well, little lady,” Anzel whispered too, joining in as he leaned down on the bar counter. With that deep, clear voice, and his lazy smile, on top of his own good looks, there had to be many women who fell for his wiles as well.

But I countered them with, “I’ll tell Lynokis,” and they immediately pulled back. That was all it took. Good to know that even they could see how unstable and dangerous my personal attendant was.

They were right to be scared though. If that monster learned they had dared to flirt with Nia Liston, they would absolutely get a target aimed at their heads. *And that just sounds annoying, so don’t do that again.*

“So you want to learn Techniques, do you?” The way they’d requested it aside, their request was a little tough. “Did you get jealous seeing how much fun Lynokis and Gandolph were having training in their own Techniques?” I could relate in that case. I’d also complain about how unfair it was if I were in their shoes. *“I want to get stronger too, but you’re only teaching them Techniques! That’s not fair, Master!” Like that?* It was very relatable indeed.

“If you get it, then teach us! I’ll even treat you to a little *extra service*.”

A little “*extra service*”? I was curious what she meant, but I resisted the urge to ask. I could tell that the answer would be questionable.

“I’m sorry to say, but there isn’t a lot I can teach you. I specialize in bare-handed combat, but you two wield weapons.” Teaching Techniques in and of

itself wasn't a problem, but I didn't know any weapon Techniques. My inability to remember anything of the sort had to be because I didn't have much practice with weapons in my past life.

"The most I can do is arrange bare-handed Techniques so they can work with weapons. But that wouldn't be a weapon Technique in that case, it would just be an extension of a bare-handed one." If you understood the fundamentals of a bare-handed Technique, you could easily adjust it for use with a weapon, but that wasn't the same as a Technique developed specifically for a weapon.

I could only say this based on instinct, but I felt like there were three main types of Techniques: those for bare-handed combat, those for using weapons, and those that could be used for either. The only Techniques I knew were the first and the third. For me, weapons were like unnecessary baggage. I was stronger with my bare hands—they were the strongest weapon one could have anyway.

"Seriously?! C'mon, you gotta be able to teach me *something!*" Fressa whined.

I truly did wish I could teach them... Did I really have nothing in my arsenal?

Oh, I may have the perfect little thing. Fressa can use a whip, so that Technique might work... It felt a little early to be teaching them Techniques, but surely it would be fine.

Following the Wedding

"That was certainly a challenge, Young Mistress."

"I agree."

It was only once we returned to the hotel and a light meal was placed in front of us that I truly felt I could relax. All of the work planned for my spring vacation was finally over. These past two weeks had really turned into one hell of a schedule. From recording in my home territory to traveling to Vanderouge only to move right back into recording. To make matters worse, it had ended with a large gathering of some of the most influential people in the country. There had been practically no time to give my mind a rest.

Even when I got the chance to take a break or sleep, there was always some corner of my mind thinking about the recording—like no matter what I did, I was always frantic about the next thing on the list, my body constantly tense. Relaxation had been utterly impossible.

“I’ll be able to get good sleep tonight.”

Now though, it was all finally complete. The wedding had been a success, and a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders.

The Huskitans were high-ranking nobles of Vanderouge, the Cauculises were the family from Marvelia that had married into the Huskitans, and all their guests were just as important as they were. Had anything happened to me, I could easily handle it with force, so I wasn’t so bothered, but the mental strain on the production crew had to have been tough, especially since there were commoners among them. They must’ve been terrified the whole time.

That too, however, was now done and dusted. Apparently, Prince Hiero and the team still had some postproduction work to do, but my job was done. I would be returning home on a flight to Altoire the next morning. And with that, my spring vacation would be coming to an end too.

What does the word “vacation” even mean anymore?

In any case, Lynokis and I decided to have a small celebration by ourselves after all our hard work.

“It looks extravagant, but at the same time, I have no idea what any of this is.”

We were seated opposite each other at a table filled with food. Every dish was so vibrant I had no idea what to look at.

We had asked to have some of the food at the wedding reception wrapped up so we could bring it back with us. Since the families had their pride and reputation on the line, they’d made everything unnecessarily lavish, both in presentation and in quantity, so there had been plenty to spare. Naturally, the chefs had put all their effort into making a good meal.

I had been attending that wedding as a member of the production crew as well, so I’d had absolutely no time to eat or even see the food. So many people had wanted to talk to me.

“These are sandwiches, then we have crackers, roasts of chicken, beef and pork, seafood salad, marinated seafood, grilled skewers... I see, I see.” Since it was buffet-style, they had served lots of small finger foods that people could easily have with their drinks.

Colorful tomatoes from this season’s harvest were dotted about, and salads and skewers were filled with fresh green vegetables. When I took a closer look, I realized that the seafood salads and marinades used a variety of ingredients. The sauces also smelled delicious.

This all looks scrumptious. Even the colors are eye-catching. It would be the perfect accompaniment with wine. If I had any.

Unsurprisingly, the main topic of discussion as we leisurely partook in our meal was the wedding.

“Lady Phyledia looked stunning in her dress,” Lynokis said.

The bride had caught her attention, had she?

“She did. What about you, Lynokis? You’re of legal age to get married now, aren’t you? Do you have anyone in mind?” I believe she said the other day that late teens, early twenties was the perfect time to get married. Personally, I quite selfishly would have preferred she not get married and focus solely on getting stronger as my student, but I couldn’t force that on her.

“No. I have you, after all.”

What? What did that mean?

“I have already offered up both body and soul to you.”

What? I didn’t remember accepting either.

“In which case, am I not practically married to you already?”

What? That wasn’t how it worked.

“Shall we have a wedding?”

Why?

“I’ll be wearing a dress, but so can you, Young Mistress. In fact, please do.”

No, seriously, why?

“Oh, come on! It’s a joke! A simple jest! Stop chomping away at the crackers with such a vacant expression! Seriously!”

What? She was joking? She was always saying stuff like this so I’d assumed she was serious.

This attendant of mine really is suspicious. And said attendant was also my original student... Whatever was I to do with this girl?



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