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# Nia Tiston

The  
Merciless Maiden





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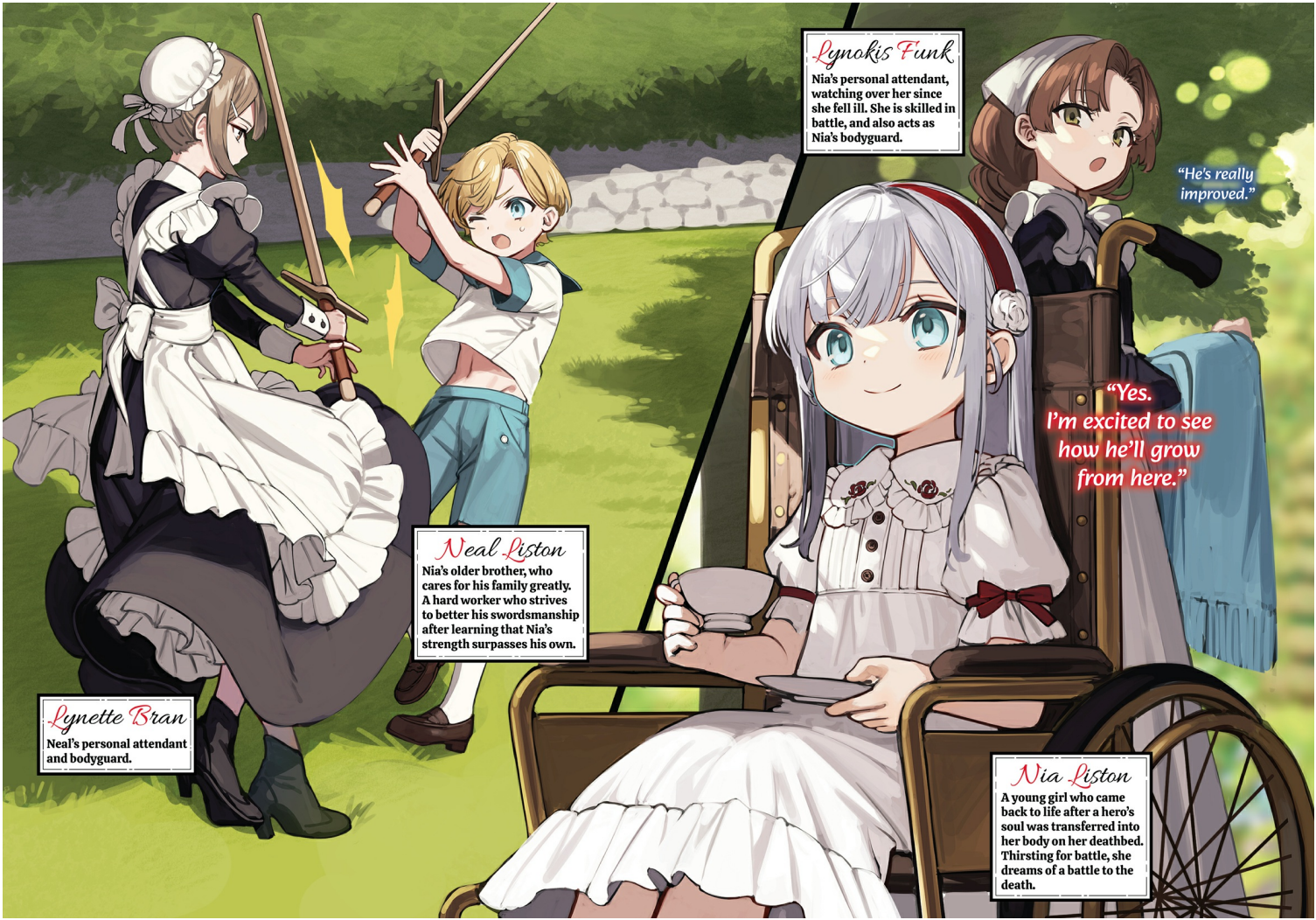
The Merciless Maiden











*Lynokis Funk*  
Nia's personal attendant, watching over her since she fell ill. She is skilled in battle, and also acts as Nia's bodyguard.

"He's really improved."

*Neal Liston*  
Nia's older brother, who cares for his family greatly. A hard worker who strives to better his swordsmanship after learning that Nia's strength surpasses his own.

*Lynette Bran*  
Neal's personal attendant and bodyguard.

*Nia Liston*  
A young girl who came back to life after a hero's soul was transferred into her body on her deathbed. Thirsting for battle, she dreams of a battle to the death.

"Yes.  
I'm excited to see how he'll grow from here."





“AH HA HA HA  
HA HA HA HA!  
C’mon, c’mon!  
If you don’t hurry up  
and finish me,  
you’re all going  
down first!”

Right after I said that, the boss was hurtling through the air.  
Why? Because I had stepped forward as fast as this body could,  
and punched him just a little bit harder than usual.

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# Prologue

The Demon King Slayer and Holy Knight, Alphen Alphon. The Martial God, Lute Billian. The foolhardy king, Thousand-Annihilator Geist Ys. The Berserk Saintess who consumes the darkness, Kjera. One need only open a history book to be faced with the names of these heroes.

King of the Prisoners, the Sinner Lichta. The Master of the Dark Arts, Vector Sully. The Mercenary King of a warring land, Grico Spencer. The Villainous Youth, Dieze. Each of these brought forth sweeping rebellions. Be they good or evil, had their positions been different, perhaps these instigators of conflict, too, would be deemed heroes.

The Lightdevourer, Moumou Lee. The Earthsplitter, Vikeranda. The Nightruler, ■■■■■. Oro the Thirsty. These elite monsters were slew by heroes, but the marks of their terror endure long after their demise.

Now then. It is time for the newest hero of this era to have her name etched into history.

She is the Red Rain who slaughters monsters with no weapon to speak of, the Pale Healing Hand who restores the wounded, the Knightslayer who crumples even the most durable armor as if it were mere paper, the Deathseeker who relentlessly desires mortal combat. Others refer to her as the Violent Lady, the Explosive Angel, the Princess of Tyranny, the Rondo of Ruin. She boasts a myriad of titles.

But of all these, the most famous title for this young lady may be the Merciless Maiden.

Her name will now forever be marked in the annals of history—a record dedicated to the elegant battles of the Merciless Maiden, befitting of a hero's name.

It is also a record of the trails walked by an icon who continued down a path that she did not wish to follow, but also did not refuse.

*The Merciless Maiden, Nia Liston.*

It was on one fateful night that her story began...



# Chapter 1: Rising out of the Darkness

Rising.

My consciousness was rising from the deepest depths of slumber. Though I had long since forgotten myself, slowly but surely, I was regaining everything.

*Yes... Yes.*

The air. The light. The scents. The prayers. The voices.

Those gentle things I had felt over many years and months were now nothing more than sensations.

Sensations that were now prying open the dark curtains of emptiness over my consciousness.

*Yes... Yes.*

A memory returned to me.

An unfortunate memory returned to me.

I remembered the one desire that I had never fulfilled in the end.

*That's right.*

*That's right.*

I had never desired a peaceful death. I had wanted to die in battle. I had wanted my flesh pierced, my blood flowing, my bones mangled.

Though my fighting spirit remained, though my *determination* to keep going remained, my body had reached its limits. Unwilling to listen to my wishes, it wanted nothing more than to listlessly collapse to the ground.

The absolute precipice of the martial arts...

The deepest abyss of the martial arts...

Just what was the answer I had ultimately reached?

I believed all I had desired for many a year was to meet an existence stronger

than mine.

That's why, this time...

This time for absolute certain...

*I will find something that can kill me.*

“Ngh?! Coff, coff!”

Though my awakening arrived gently, it was interrupted by a sudden discomfort... No, it was a physical pain.

*What is this body?!*

My coughs wouldn't stop. Each one wracked my body, sending a shivering chill up my spine—almost as if the grim reaper itself had a hand upon me.

I could feel it. My life was withering away.

The continuous coughing that scraped away at what was left of my life was accompanied by a visceral fear of death. My insides were screaming so hard it was like they were being torn apart. My survival instincts were raising their own cry.

Death itself would peek out and then duck back into hiding.

*No matter how many times I experience this, death is frightening. No matter how many times I experience this... No matter how many times I experience this?*

My coughing fit subsided.

I was so exhausted I could barely lift a finger, and I limply let my body fall back into what I now realized was a bed.

The moment I was able to take in my surroundings, I heard a man's voice from right beside me. “Has it stopped?”

I turned my gaze towards him, but the man was unfamiliar to me. He wore a black robe with the hood pulled far over his head. I couldn't see his face properly.

Though, if we were to catalog all that which was unfamiliar, it would include my current location and the original owner of this body. In fact, I felt like the



things I *did* know numbered far less. Actually, no, perhaps I could state definitively: I knew not a single thing.

The room I was in was dimly lit, with only the bare minimum lighting. It appeared to be someone's bedroom.

This body was most likely diseased. It was marching towards death, not due to anything external, but entirely internal. As much as I hated to admit it, I knew: my new body was not long for this world.

"I have a request," the hooded man said. "Survive for just one single day. You need do naught else."

I parted my lips.

"Tell me...what is going on..."

My mouth was dry and my voice was hoarse. Given the high pitch, this body must have belonged to a child.

"I was hired to use the art of spirit invocation. The soul of this body has already left this world...and so I was able to insert another soul as a replacement. Namely, yours."

My soul was but a replacement?

*No... Of course. I understand now.*

"The body you now reside in formerly belonged to the daughter of an aristocrat. Her parents hired me to keep her alive at great monetary reward. They don't want their daughter to die, and I require money—more than words can express. I imagine that, should nothing change, you may have only a few days left to live. This body already passed its limits long ago."

Yes, I imagined so. I could feel it keenly.

"I have no idea who you are," he continued. "You could be some great villain, or perhaps you aren't even human. Maybe you're a demon. Maybe you're some vengeful ghost. But regardless, I must ask this of you: Just for one day, do nothing but survive. Survive until I receive my payment and leave this island. Please live until that time comes."

This hooded man was making quite the selfish demand. After saying what he

needed to say, he left my side.

“I’m sorry. I truly am,” he apologized as he left the room. “If we meet in hell, you’re welcome to kill me.”

And then I closed my eyes.

That man had forcefully awakened my dead self and shoved me into a terminally ill body that would meet its end within a few days.

In other words, that man had called my spirit back only to make me experience death once more.

In other words, that man was asking me to taste death a second time after having already suffered through it once.

In other words, that man had *forced* this dying body on me despite not knowing who I was—all to make this host live for one day more.

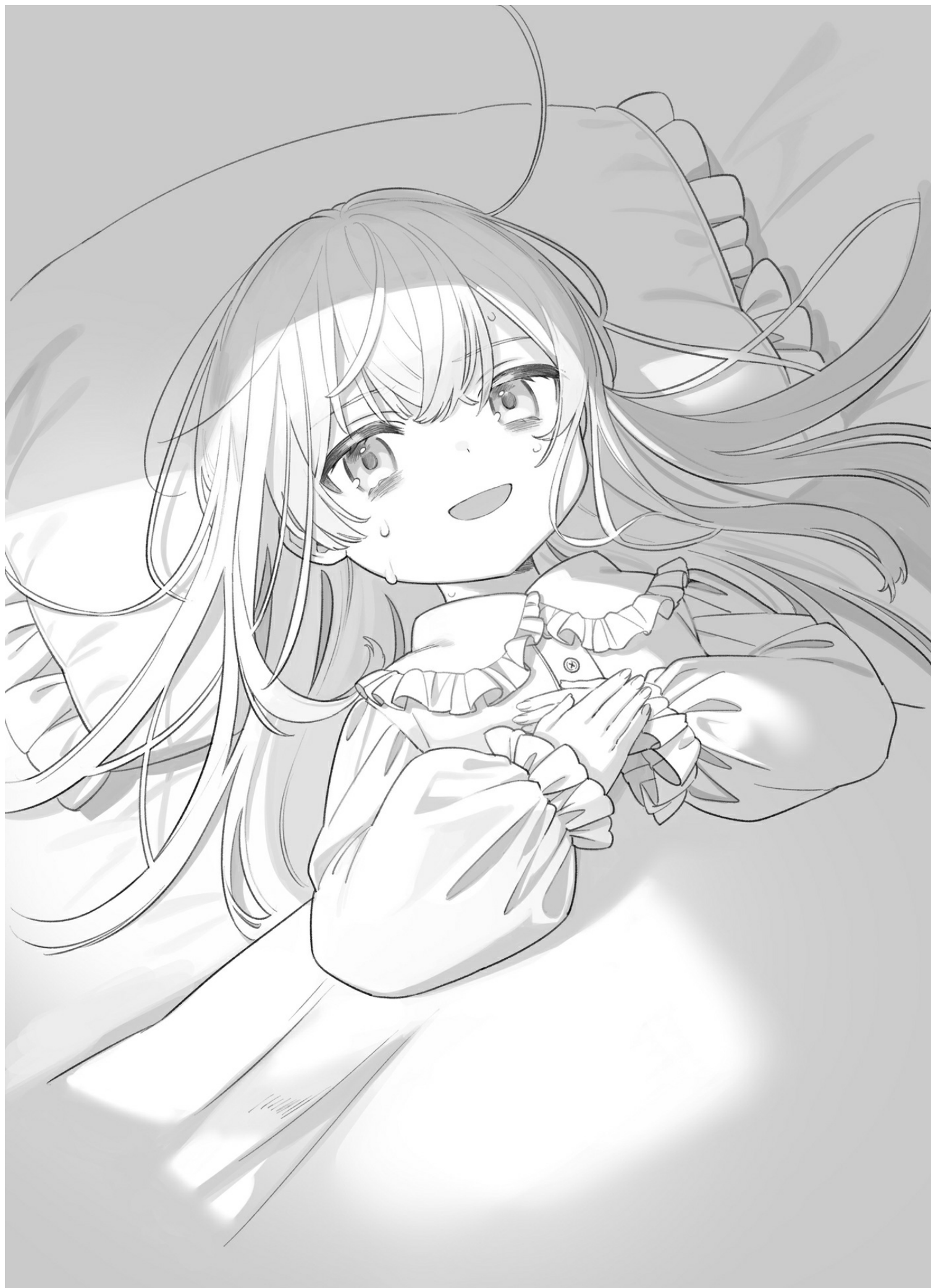
“Ha ha... Ha ha ha!” Could there be anything more laughable? I’d never imagined I would get the chance to die twice. Life truly was unpredictable, even if my last one had already ended long ago.

“If...anyone else had been put into this body...it most certainly would’ve died.”

I raised both of my heavy hands, each cloaked in death, and layered them over my heart as if I were a corpse inside a coffin. But my doing this was to bring myself closer to life.

I was lucky. If I had not been trained in chi, my second death would have already overtaken this body.





“Nia! Nia!”

“Oh, I’m so glad! So, so glad...!”

The name of this body appeared to be Nia.

The man and woman noisily crying by this body’s bedside were most likely Nia’s parents.

*All right, all right, I get it. I understand that you’re overjoyed that your child’s life has been extended, but stop shaking me. I can’t focus on controlling her chi.*

I had yet to fully see this body for myself, but given how tall her parents looked from this perspective, Nia was likely a child, and a small one at that. She was able to converse, so at the very least, she wasn’t an infant.

“Niaaaaa! Niaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Live! Please, just live!”

*Oh, come on already, I am. And stop shaking me. I’m gonna die. Keep this up and I really will die.*

Thinking about this situation rationally, this was, in a sense, me taking over the life of this body. And these people would raise me, convinced they were raising their own child. They had no idea who I was nor where I had come from, and yet, they would be caring for me.

Mm, well, not much I could do about that.

All of the blame rested on that hooded man. I was simply a victim of the whole affair, and the one who allowed the body of Nia, fated to death, to actually survive. At the very least, I had no intention of letting myself succumb to disease like this. I would not let something like illness take down one such as myself.

According to that man, the original Nia had in fact already left this world... If that were true, I could only hope that she was able to rest in peace, no longer living in fear of the specter of death.

Though—as my current predicament made apparent—it appeared that even if one were to be allowed to rest peacefully as I should have been, there were



cases in which you would be rudely woken up by some inconsiderate person.

“Niaaaaaaaa! NIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“Oh, Nia! You are our greatest treasure!”

*Could you both be any louder? Honestly.*

I opened my eyes slightly and looked over at the two beside me with rebuke. They were holding hands, sobbing tears of joy while they wailed like a seal and a crow.

“Pray leave her be, Master, Mistress. The Young Mistress appears tired. Let us allow her to rest.”

Though he hadn’t quite entered the room, there was someone by the entrance. He sounded like an elderly man. Given how he addressed them, I could only surmise he was a servant of the household. Nia’s parents were dressed rather well; were they perhaps from the upper class?

No, they had to be. There was no perhaps about it.

That was how the hooded man managed to swindle a large amount of cash from them to temporarily keep Nia’s body alive with his fraudulent soul-swap, which hadn’t truly solved the issue of her mortality. Most likely, at least. I hadn’t seen it all go down myself, so I couldn’t say for sure just how much they had given him.

My seal and a crow of a father and mother reluctantly left my bedside.

Should I view them as people who loved too deeply or simply parents who doted excessively on their daughter? Or should I view them as both?

*Well, whichever it may be, while I never wished for this to happen, now that I’m back, I have no intentions of dying right away.*

Now that I had received this body, I had no other choice than to live as Nia. In which case, it was up to me to take on the duties and responsibilities that she should have borne.

If respecting Nia’s parents allowed her soul to rest in peace, then how about I show a little filial piety, hm?

If I wanted to do that, though, first... First, I had to beat into submission this devil of illness eating away at her body.

*Hee hee, oh, you poor little disease. Do you really think you can win against me?*

I could hardly call my prone position ideal for circulating chi, but I had no choice but to work with it. I laid both hands over my heart from my place on the bed and guided the chi through my whole body.

*Though I must say, not only is this body frail, the circulation of its chi is incredibly stunted.*

The size of the body more than likely played a challenging role as well. It was *because* it was a child's body that there was noticeably little chi to shape, and the body's weakened state decreased the chi further. With the devil blocking the chi's meridians, the chi was not simply struggling to circulate, it was outright being blocked.

Chi is a life force unconsciously circulated around the bodies of all living beings. Should its flow be unnaturally interrupted in any manner, it can lead to disease.

*Is the focus of the disease the lungs?*

There were other areas negatively affected as well, but there was no mistake that the organs were the areas most impacted by the devil.

*All right, that should do it.*

I shaped the chi within Nia's small and frail body, circulating it through all the pathways. Slowly but surely, the disease built up around her lungs was whittled down by the chi until the pathway was clear enough for it to continue its advance.

I couldn't tell just how much time it would take, but with this, her disease would heal.

By using precise control of the body's chi to stimulate the body's self-cleansing mechanisms and energies, one could easily remove a devil of illness.

Disease dared not steal me from the world of the living, whether in my last

life or this one.

But...

*Just who exactly was I?*

I had unconsciously turned to chi to heal my ailing body, but what even was “chi” to begin with?

I had absolutely no idea who I had been...

*Ah, it matters not.*

Henceforth, I would be living as the girl named Nia. And with that being the case, perhaps it was for the best that I could only vaguely recall my past. That which was precious or important to my previous life should have been engraved on my soul. No doubt my impulse to use chi came from those etched memories.

So long as I ensured I experienced much over the following months and years—having my flesh pierced, being bathed in blood, allowing myself to get carried away by war and battle—I was sure I would remember at least what was necessary.

Until then, it mattered not whether I knew who I had been.

There was no need to rush.

Now that I had attained this body, I was not about to let it die so quickly.

All of that said, I had little idea of the specifics of this body’s life either. It did not retain Nia’s memories. As much as I searched, I could find no hint of them.

Though I wasn’t aware of the details, I did know that a human thinks with their brain, and the memories are retained in said brain. I had initially thought that the lack of my own memory was because I did not have the organ that retained those memories in the first place. After all, I was nothing more than a soul; it wasn’t as if my brain came along with me.

*Well, no point dwelling on it, I suppose.*

Nia was still a child. It shouldn’t take too much time for such a young life to



regain its memories. Being bedridden, it was unlikely she had experienced enough of life to have more than a handful of unforgettable times, anyway. And even if she had, there was no changing the reality that I couldn't remember them. That which is not there cannot suddenly appear, and that which cannot be remembered cannot suddenly be so.

There was simply nothing more to it.

Regardless, in that moment her body was of more importance than her memories. I had to prioritize dealing with the disease that was taking control of Nia's body before anything else. Dealing with any other issues would come *after* her body survived this ordeal.

After all, it was still very much teetering on the edge.

The tickling of the throat would appear without warning and always gave way to a cough that would ruthlessly pull my almost-dozing consciousness back to reality. Every time I would begin coughing, someone—from what I could see, it seemed like a servant girl—would come to check up on me.

Though that scene was repeated many a time, dawn broke without any further incident.

On the surface, that was the night that a hooded man saved a girl near death. But behind it all, it was the night that a foreign consciousness began living within the soulless body of a girl who'd left it behind.

I turned my head to the side and looked through the lace curtains that covered a large window.

The light outside the window was bright.

I was the one now living through Nia's lost tomorrow.

## Chapter 2: The First Act of Love

As I dazedly gazed outside the window at the brightening dawn, a young girl entered the room.

“Good morning.”

It was the same girl who had been checking up on me all through the night. From her attire, she appeared to be an attendant. So she was a servant of the house, after all.

*Hm? This girl is strong.*

There was not a single defensive opening in her movements, and she had a strong core. This girl was likely very aware that not putting on too much muscle was best for her medium build. Though from my point of view, she might have been a little too thin. I almost wanted to tell her to eat more meat.

But the flaws of a body's weight or muscle mass could often be made up in large part with training or through wielding a weapon. She did seem like the kind to use a weapon to fill in for what her body lacked. In fact, I was fairly sure she was hiding a weapon under her skirt.

*Honestly, though? Even in my current body, I'm sure I could take her down in my sleep. She isn't much of a threat.*

“How do you feel today, Young Mistress?”

Young Mistress.

That was me.

Which meant Nia really was the daughter of a rich family.

*I, of all people, am now the young lady of a well-off family...* It admittedly felt a little uncomfortable to consider, but if I intended to live as Nia, I would simply have to get used to it. Still, how should I answer? The silence stretched as I considered my response. Just what kind of girl was Nia? What kind of relationship had she held with her attendant?

Before I could think of a reply, though, the attendant was already wrapping her arms around my back and helping me sit up. If she knew to go ahead with taking care of me even with no response, perhaps Nia wasn't the most talkative girl.

I could hardly blame her. She was so weak she could barely even walk. Such conditions would be tough even for an adult. Trying to find the energy to be happy would no doubt have been challenging.

"It is time for your meal now."

Oh my, it was time for food.

In truth, I completely lacked an appetite, and I had no confidence my stomach would even accept whatever entered it. But people could not live without sustenance. Part of the reason this body was so weak was that it hadn't been receiving even the bare minimum food it required.

Even looking at my hands, they were so small and thin, they were practically skin and bones. They were so pale I almost worried there was no blood flowing through them at all. I had yet to see myself properly, but I could tell just by the state of my hands that this body was even more emaciated than I had imagined.

Seeing what horrible condition I was in, I most definitely needed to replenish nutrients. Without it, there was a limit to what I could do with this body's chi. The source of chi, the source of one's life force, was food. A body couldn't do without its nourishment. Chi could heal disease, but this energy could not be born from nothing.

So for now, I had to eat—especially if I wanted to cultivate more chi.

I was stuffed.

A gentle porridge, and vegetables boiled so soft they fell apart in my mouth—this was the quintessential meal for one who was ill: easy to digest and not too strong in flavor.

*Not quite enough for me, but with Nia's body in the state it is, I'm sure it would struggle to keep down much else. One day, I would love to eat the juiciest meat just dripping with blood... No, no!* If I thought of such heavy foods right



then, I would definitely vomit. Solids were already hard enough, but even the thought of greasy foods made me nauseous.

“Oh my! You ate *all* of it?!”

All I’d done was forcefully shove the food down my throat, and here the attendant was both surprised and overjoyed. Though I was most certainly feeling the consequences.

My body was attempting to reject the simple meal, but every time it threatened to rise, I would cover my mouth with my hand and force it to stay down. *Digest it. Hurry up.* I didn’t care how many times this body tried to reject the food, I *would* keep it down.

“Have you taken your medicine?”

Knowing there was no way I could keep down the food *and* take the medicine, I shook my head with my hand still clamped over my mouth, and the attendant thankfully understood my predicament.

“Ah. I see.”

Given her surprise, I had likely shown an appetite very unlike Nia. Not that I’m sure you could call it an appetite given I had simply shoved it down out of necessity.

*Oh well, I suppose I’ll be continuing my life like this for a while yet. What a bother.*

My time doing nothing but fighting against the disease continued for about a week.

Because I had made sure to force down all the food given to me each meal, the amount I was given was also silently increased over time. Pretending I hadn’t noticed, I continued the motions of taking the food and forcefully swallowing.

Following the meal, I would take a sedative, medicine made from magic herbs for my lungs, and some sleeping pills. I was constantly half asleep, focusing all my energy in circulating the chi around my body. And due to my efforts...

*It seems the results are starting to show themselves.*

Gradually, I became able to take meals without my body fighting back as much as it used to, and I reached the point of actually looking forward to them each day. They even started to be served with small fruits or desserts.

It didn't change that I was only being served easily digestible foods which honestly weren't quite enough for me, but I was glad for a change of flavor. The excitement I felt at the prospect of getting to eat sweet foods was immense.

The coughs that used to plague this body would always signal that feeling of death approaching, but now, they were few and far between. Appearance wise, I didn't look much better, but I could feel the desire to move around more.

It meant that this body had found the will to live.

For so long, this body had been stuck in a perpetual lethargy, every part of it from the inside out screaming in pain, and yet it had managed to make it this far.

Given I had been consistently working with the chi within Nia's body for so long, I had also managed to improve my control over it. With my current level of influence over her chi, I would likely even be able to take off the head of a small monster with a knifehand strike. Had I the energy, I was sure I could even conquer a simple labyrinth—perhaps even survive in a rank-four danger zone. Again, if I had the energy...

After finishing the breakfast that had once more been ever so slightly increased in volume, Nia's attendant, Lynokis, raised the suggestion: "How about it, Young Mistress? Would you like to try and go outside?"

I had pulled out as much info as possible concerning Nia over this last week. I now knew her attendant, who was sixteen years of age, was called Lynokis.

She had been hired by the Liston family after graduating from the middle school division of Altoire Academy's Department of Adventuring about half a year ago, and she currently resided in the Liston house as well.

Lynokis had been hired to take care of Nia specifically, after the family learned what she was capable of. Around that time, Nia—who had been a frail girl since birth—became further afflicted with disease and collapsed.

I imagined the young woman's job had been tough.

Though it was paid work, she had been assigned to look after a young girl who was getting weaker and weaker by the day... For one who was neither cruelly unfeeling or skilled at compartmentalizing, there was no doubt that this would take a great emotional toll.

"Outside..." I muttered, gazing out the large window. The curtains were open, allowing me to see the sprawling blue sky. This room appeared to be on the second floor, though, so I could see little else.

The outside, hm?

"Would I be able to make it in time to see mother and father off?"

Those parents—who I had questioned if their love was too deep or if they were simply single-minded about their child—left every day for work. They would come see me when they came home in the evening and then once more before they slept.

They used to come in the mornings as well, but Lynokis had told me that their schedules were constantly packed, so I had asked them to stop coming to give them more time for themselves. They came the day after I had become Nia and the second morning, but after that, I had told Lynokis to inform them that wasn't necessary.

All of our mornings were busy, including my own; I was fully occupied with fighting the disease. It was about time I tried to increase the range at which I could move beyond this room.

If Nia's parents had spent every day worrying, then showing them their daughter in slightly better spirits could be called a form of filial piety.

"I'm afraid not... The master and mistress have already left the premises."

Ah. I had just missed them, then.

"I guess I was right to have them stop visiting me in the morning. I must have caused them so much trouble."

My mealtimes remained consistent, and Nia's parents' morning visit always coincided with my breakfast. And that early appointment meant they had very



likely been making time specifically to see me. Having them stop with their morning greetings allowed them to leave a bit earlier.

“Oh, never. Your parents have always viewed you as more precious than their work.”

That may well have been the case given how intense their love felt.

“But it’s because father and mother go to work every day that I’m alive right now. I’m already causing them bother with my illness; I don’t want to give them more unnecessary burden.”

Had I really been their daughter, it might have been okay to simply accept their affections. Spoiling myself with their unconditional love and giving them a smile might have been more than enough. But my own circumstances were different.

I may have become Nia, but I wasn’t *only* Nia. Given I was more than just Nia alone, I couldn’t take their unconditional love without question. In which case, I wanted to live giving them as little trouble as possible.

If I wanted to do that, I had to hurry up and heal.

“I’ll wait until tomorrow before I go outside. Be sure to prepare my breakfast early. I want to see mother and father off.”

“Very well, Young Mistress.”

I was unsure how she received my words, but Lynokis smiled with a crease between her brows. “You’re...certainly much more considerate of a person than myself,” she added.

Hm?

“Is this not normal?” I asked her. Even children could show consideration for their parents.

“If that was normal, then my position...”

So that was it. Lynokis was lacking in consideration, was she? “I heard that girls who can’t show consideration for others aren’t popular.”

“Those are not the words I expected to be faced with from a child less than

half my age...”

Lynokis was aghast, but I cared not. I was busy with my own fight.

And so another morning came without any notable events.

My breakfast came early as I had requested, and after finishing, I was helped into a wheelchair. Thankfully, my body no longer rejected the food as it used to. I didn't feel nauseous either. The volume of the food could be a little bit of a problem, though.

Every meal had the tiniest bit more added. Slowly but surely, spoonful by spoonful, my stomach's capacity was growing. However, I would take whatever I was given as this body needed it.

Lynokis wheeled me out of the room, and we continued down a carpeted hallway towards the entrance hall. An elderly butler was standing at the end, waiting by the stairs that led down to the first floor.

He was a butler who had long served this family, so tall and thin that he looked like a withered tree. But there was no way for me to miss the well-trained muscles hiding underneath his uniform. Even at this age, he was strong.

Though it was plain to see he was past his prime, he had undoubtedly been many times stronger at his peak.

*Things may have been different when he was younger, but as this butler is now, I could take him down easily with just my pinky finger from my wheelchair. In fact, even if he were at his peak, just my left arm would be enough. That is the extent of his abilities.*

The old butler gave us a nod as we exited my bedroom, and then he made his way down the stairs. He must have gone ahead to make any final preparations.

When we made it far enough that we could overlook the entrance, my mother and father, cleaned up and dressed in well-fitting suits, swiftly made their way to the door.

“Father, mother!”

I raised my voice as much as my tiny little body would allow. Despite the

effort, the volume was only slightly raised, not even a yell. Regardless, my call reached the two people rushing out the door.

“Nia!”

They were both surprised when they turned round and saw I had come to see them off.

*It may be a small step, but for Nia, this hopefully serves as a suitable act of love towards her parents.*

After a week of this, seeing Nia’s parents off in the morning had become routine. Seven days of wishing them well meant it had been two weeks since I had become Nia.

“It should be about time...” I muttered under my breath as I finished the meal that was still slightly increasing in volume each day.

“Pardon?”

“There’s no need for you to watch over me at night anymore,” I told Lynokis, who stood at attention by my side.

“What?”

Every night, Lynokis would remain just outside my room as I slept, so she could immediately respond were I to require assistance. During those early days when my coughs were constant, she would make sure to check in every time, so she could assist me before it was too late. But there was no need for that any longer.

“I don’t cough as much as I used to, so I think I’m fine now. I can even go to the bathroom by myself.” I had been gradually breaking down the devil’s offensive with my chi, but I was still far from a full recovery. I was in this for the long haul, but for now, at least, I’d crossed the biggest hurdle: the shadow of the grim reaper had disappeared.

I could now confidently make the judgment that the possibility I would suffer a sudden death was gone.

“I can’t deny that you’re doing well. Your appetite has gotten so much better



over the past few days too, so I do agree that your condition is stable.”

“While we’re on the topic, you’ve slowly been adding more and more food to my meals, haven’t you?”

She ignored my question and continued, “I will go call on Jayes so we can discuss any new possible arrangements.”

“But the food—”

She was already zooming off before I could finish.

That was absolutely the look of someone who knew about the increasing portions and kept quiet about it. In fact, she may have even been the one behind it. Not that it was a big deal.

My stomach may hurt a little after each meal, but it was absolutely a necessary form of sustenance. There was no harm in making my body take in a little more of it.

And despite me noticing the portions were getting larger, it wasn’t by an unreasonable amount. Personally, the portions I was eating were still too small. A child Nia’s age would usually be eating more, after all.

When Lynokis called Jayes, the elderly butler, to my room, we discussed what I had mentioned to Lynokis, about no longer needing someone to watch over me at night.

“I see... If you believe the Young Mistress to be of fit enough health, then allow me to discuss it with the master and mistress.”

Jayes was ever the gentleman. Though his face was pulled down in unhidden worry, he listened to my request and acknowledged it.

“However, I will have Lynokis moved into the neighboring room. Should you need anything, ring the bell and call for her. Do you understand? Can you promise me that?”

“Yes, I promise.” I couldn’t see the occasion to ring the bell ever arriving, though. And even if it did, I had no reason to try and act tough about it. *A simple promise to make if it means letting me be free of Lynokis’s constant nightly supervision.*

I saw off my parents yet again and then returned to my room.

“I will be taking my break now, Young Mistress. Please call one of the maids if you are in need of anything.”

Lynokis would now nap... No, completely sleep until noon.

She had spent nights awake for my sake in case I required her assistance. Though it was something she was paid for, I kneeled to her dedication. At least she would be able to sleep at more regular times now.

*Now then.*

With Lynokis gone, I had time for myself.

Nia's routine was simple. Usually, she would eat, have her medicine, and then rest, and that cycle would repeat. Rest was especially important, and no one would come unless I called for them. While I had been out the room to see my parents off, the maids had taken the window of opportunity to make my bed and do some simple cleaning.

To not interrupt my rest, I would be left alone until Lynokis arrived with my lunch.

*It's a very convenient routine for me.*

I lowered my legs down over the bed and let my feet softly sink into the carpet. With my body still as weak and thin as it was, even standing was painful. I could manage slow steps, but generally I would move around in my wheelchair or by being carried by Lynokis.

That would all start to change.

“Nope, never mind, this still isn't feasible.”

I tried stretching a little, but even that was difficult. If I bent my knees all the way down, I had no confidence I could stand myself back up. At the moment, this body didn't have enough muscle. This problem was beyond just needing to exercise; it seemed like it would still take a bit more time before I could walk normally.

*At this rate, I won't be able to pierce even those pesky orcs with just a spearhand strike. Lopping its head off with a knifehand would be the best I could manage.*

Well, whatever. Dealing with my disease came before the issue of my muscles.

So I couldn't be seen should someone suddenly come in, I made my way to the side of the bed where I wouldn't be visible from the doorway and sat on the floor. I didn't think anyone would interrupt, but better safe than sorry.

Being seen wouldn't necessarily be a problem, but it would be unnatural for a girl as young and sheltered as Nia to know of what I was about to practice.

I sat with my knees open, legs and feet crossed; spread my arms lightly to the left and right; and gently hovered my hands above my knees, palms upwards.

"Perfect."

As I expected, chi flowed around the body much easier while in the lotus position, a pose primed for meditation.

It flowed from the left hand, to the left leg, to the right leg, from the right leg to the right hand, passing up through the right shoulder to the head. Then it would flow through the left shoulder, back down to the left hand again.

The chi was circulating through my body much more smoothly and vigorously than when I was confined to my bed. Though this was the weakened body of a child, chi still circulated through its pathways, and I cultivated it with much care.

There was still a disease sitting in the center of this body. Its channels were still stained with that devil, but the chi was slowly but surely chipping away at it, melting it down.

It was greatly important that I spend my long nights like this.

I'd only need a week before I would be ready for the next step.

*Incidentally, what even is meditation?*

My memories were still missing. I instinctively knew what to do, but I still had not remembered where I had learned this or why I even knew of it in the first place.

*But there's no use thinking about it now.*

If the memories were vital enough, I would remember them in due time.

“Now, you wretched devil. Let's fight for real, shall we?”

I would not succumb to disease, just as I had not in my previous life. As hazy as my memories were, I remembered that much.

“I should've killed you right from the start. Let me be clear: there is no longer a way for you to achieve victory.” And that would be the case now too.

My second death might one day slay me, but disease would never be the killing blow.



## Chapter 3: Magivision and MagiPads

“Young Mistress, the weather outside is lovely today. Care to try leaving the mansion?”

Lynokis raised the suggestion while I was eating lunch.

Three weeks had passed since I became Nia. My illness was healing smoothly. I was rapidly approaching a time when coughs would no longer wake me and I could have a whole night’s rest. Though said “rest” would actually be my meditation time, so I still wouldn’t exactly be sleeping.

*The outside, huh.*

I turned to look out the window, but the lace curtains were drawn. Despite this, the light was blinding as it shone through. It certainly was good weather.

*Hm... The outside.*

It *would* be a nice change of pace, but I wanted to focus on sitting in meditation for now. My daily efforts were bearing fruit, and I felt good. I could feel pure chi filling every bit of my body. Had I also acquired stamina and strength, I’m sure I would have greatly wanted to move my body.

“No, I’ll continue my rest.”

For now, my schedule must remain the same: a long session of meditation from night until morning. Eat breakfast, see off Nia’s parents, take a small nap. Eat lunch, then return to meditation.

No matter what I wanted to do, until I disposed of this devil, I would be unable to do it. Even simply going outside was something I felt could wait until I was fully recovered. In fact, I thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have the prospect of going out as a goal, to celebrate when I finally did manage to recover.

“But I think it would be good for you to go out for some sun—you haven’t been outside for over three months now. You seem better today, so why not

have a little walk around the garden?”

Oh, of course, sunlight.

I couldn't explain specifically why, but I thought I remembered that bathing in the light of the sun was somehow good for you. It was like the power of the sun was transmitted into your core and your body absorbed that strength. Maybe it was just my imagination, though.

That said, it was true that my skin was pale enough for Lynokis to worry.

“Then maybe for a little while.”

Lynokis was as happy as if this were a walk for her own sake, and she immediately began preparing the outdoor clothes and shoes that I myself had never worn and Nia had likely not worn in ages.

*Wait, why do I need shoes if I'll be in a wheelchair? Just give me slippers.*

We were going out to *our* garden, right? Was there really a need for any of this?

I attempted to indirectly convey my thoughts to Lynokis, but she was already determined that I was going to be getting completely changed. There was no reason for me to argue, though, so I allowed it. She would be the one to dress me so I wouldn't be using up too much of my energy either.

I wished I had recovered enough that I could dress myself, but what could you do?

“What about this outfit?”

“That would be good.”

“So we'll go with these?”

“Yes, that's fine.”

“Oh, but what about this?”

“Mm-hmm.”

*I'm eating my lunch here. Stop showing me clothes. Stop making me choose. I'll wear anything.* For some reason, every time she asked me about my clothes or my shoes or my hair or about any accessories, it felt like she was rushing me

to hurry up and finish eating.

Out of a slight sense of obligation, I quickly finished my meal and took my medicine, after which Lynokis spared no time in getting me changed.

She dressed me in a white dress covered in lace and frills with a red ribbon accent. The choice of shoes seemed to have been coordinated with the color of the ribbon. Though I wished she'd chosen a different color for my dress; blood shows up blatantly on white.

"What do you think?" she asked, showing me myself in the mirror. My first thought went straight to how white my overall appearance was. The second was that...I really was a child.



Nia Liston—a girl only four years of age.

Having only recently been able to finally keep down food without difficulty, this body was still far too thin, and having been lacking sunlight, my skin was sickly pale. Well, I *was* sick, so these features weren't so strange.

Because of how thin I was, my blue eyes looked so unnaturally huge, as if they were going to fall out of their sockets. Get some meat on my bones and I was sure I'd look far cuter.

Essentially, my body was unbalanced in many areas.

On top of all that, no one would dare mention it, but there was the matter of this long gray hair, as well. Between Nia's parents, her father was a platinum blond, her mother a light brunette. Though they were both pale colors, neither of them had white or silver hair. Nia's hair didn't resemble either parent's... I assumed it was a result of the life force used up with this body being pushed to the brink of death, especially since the real Nia had in reality been pushed *over* the brink.

Loss of hair color was something that happened when one used too much mana, as well, but usually, the hair would return to normal over time... Even though three weeks had passed, Nia's hair color didn't seem to be returning. In fact, I thought it was likely to remain this stark white color forever.

*Looking at it like this, for being only four years old, she's experienced nothing but pain.*

If there had been some way for me to take that pain from her, I would have, but that could no longer be fulfilled.

Nia no longer existed.

"My name is Nia Liston. My hobbies are taking medicine and resting in bed. I'm a four-year-old girl fighting her illness with all her might. My favorite seasoning is salt, and my favorite flavor isn't that nonsense people say about the taste of ingredients that are prepared to their best, but food that is properly seasoned. My dream is to eat a big massive steak the size of a grown-up's leather shoe with any seasoning *other* than salt."



*Okay, perfect. I'm completely Nia Liston now.*

I gave it a shot on a whim, but I was able to introduce myself without pause. I should be fine if I was ever asked who I was. There was no way I could mess it up. Even if I wasn't particularly lively or upbeat when saying it, I did think I was at least giving off a refined and intelligent air that not all children possessed.

Nothing would leave a special impression other than my hair. Such a modest image fit this girl well, I thought. Even if I accidentally gave a strange introduction, I still wouldn't come across as a girl that could kill an unseemly orc with a simple kick.

"Oh, should I add that I want to be daddy's bride one day? Flatter him in that way only children can? There are some fathers who would be very happy about that, no?"

Lynokis was silent behind me.

"What do you think?" I asked, looking at her in the mirror. "Should I butter him up?"

Lynokis flashed an uncomfortable smile, but she said nothing as she lifted me up and placed me in the wheelchair.

Lynokis carried me down the stairs to the entrance hall. On the way down, she asked one of the maids to fetch the wheelchair that was kept down on the first floor.

"Oh my, heading out for a walk, are we?" Jayes asked when we bumped into him where he had been waiting downstairs, but even though he asked me that question, I couldn't answer. I was being carried, after all. Lynokis was the one really going on a walk here. Disregarding my silence, Jayes opened the entrance for us, and Lynokis pushed me outside.

I squinted my eyes at the sunlight shining down.

Since this body had not left the house for a few months, the sensations of the sun and the outside air were so strong. It was fine, though; I would adjust soon enough. In fact, after only a few moments, I had already adjusted.

The rays of the sun were warm, and the breeze that gently caressed my skin was cool. Though the wind seemed a bit strong, the season was a pleasant one. And sprawling out in front of me was truly a sight for sore eyes: a vibrant garden clearly handled with thoughtful care.

And by that, I really meant sprawling. There was seemingly no end to it.

“The garden is so big.”

“Indeed. As is to be expected of the mansion of a class-four aristocrat.”

What had she said?

“What is a ‘class-four aristocrat’?”

“Oh my, have you never been told?”

“Well, how am I supposed to know? I’m still only four. I know very little. In fact, there’s more that I *don’t* know. Isn’t it cruel for you to criticize a four-year-old for being clueless?”

“I don’t think most four-year-olds would respond in such a manner...”

Lynokis kindly explained to me as we slowly made our way around the garden.

First, this country was a monarchy, with the king being of the first class, and then fourteen more classes below him, for fifteen in total. Classes fifteen to twelve were for the common people, and then classes eleven and upwards were reserved for aristocrats...nobles, essentially. People would understand what I meant if I said nobles, but apparently, that was the term used for a foreign class system. Here, they were known as aristocrats.

With that explanation in mind, that would mean the Liston family were aristocrats fourth from the top.

“No wonder, then...”

The garden looked endless, but the mansion was just as abnormally large. Not only did my parents look refined, they had many household servants like Lynokis and Jayes. There were even multiple gardeners, three already present in front of us. My parents had both the money and the power to give their bedridden child all the medicine she needed and hire that shady magician that

had called my soul here.

If the root of all this was a well-paid ruling class, then that would make sense.

“So what does it mean as an aristocrat to be class-four?”

“As someone who was born to a commoner family, I don’t know all the specifics of aristocratic society, but the Liston family is one out of no more than ten families of the fourth class, so I would surmise it is quite significant. Your family has also been entrusted with this floating island and the surrounding ones for generations. I believe that if you include the islands of all sizes, the Listons govern about seventeen of them.”

Wow. They were in a class of only ten families, and they had seventeen islands as their territory. In that case, they had impressive influence.

Now for the next question: “So what are these floating islands exactly?”

There were so many words I didn’t know being said. Honestly, that interested me far more than the walk itself. I would be living in this body from here on out. There were no doubt many things I had to learn.

Two months had passed since I became Nia.

The schedule had now settled into seeing my parents off in the morning and going for a walk in the garden on nice days.

My health wasn’t doing bad at all. Recently, I’d been able to make it through a whole night without a coughing fit disturbing me, and my meal portions had reached a size that was suitable for a girl of this age. Incidentally, the size of my portions had stopped increasing at some point, so this very likely was deemed the ideal amount.

As for the devil, it was already in its death throes. To paint a clearer image, the time to slit the throat of the damned thing was nearing. I was taking all the time I needed to shave it down to its last cell, making sure I wasn’t letting my guard down just yet.

“Good morning, Young Mistress. Young Master Neal should be arriving home today.”

Neal?

“Who’s that?”

“Your older brother, the Young Master Neal Liston.”

I wasn’t sure if it was because I had already asked her so many questions about commonsense things that I should know—questions about Lynokis included—but even when I asked who my own *brother* was, something that should have been exceedingly unnatural, she responded to my question without any hesitation or bewilderment.

Honestly, I couldn’t help but worry if it was really okay for these questions to be answered with no doubts, but I wasn’t about to start complaining about something that benefited me.

“I have a brother?”

“Now that’s taking it a little far.”

So there were questions that were strange.

I couldn’t help it, though. I really didn’t know anything. At least that confirmed she wasn’t being too lax about this whole situation. This attendant had seemed easy to read at first, but perhaps that wasn’t the case.

“He is in his first year of elementary school at Altoire Academy. As it is summer vacation now, he is returning home from the dorms.”

I see.

“Did we have a good relationship?”

“As far as I’m aware, you didn’t interact very much.”

Lynokis came to the Liston estate as an attendant half a year—no, it would be eight months ago now. She had been hired to be Nia’s personal attendant after Nia had collapsed.

In other words, Lynokis only had eight months of history with the Liston family.

Neal had entered Altoire Academy about three months ago. He had moved to the dorm and hadn’t returned home since, so Lynokis apparently hadn’t

interacted with him all that often either. Nia had been bedridden for a whole five months when he left for the academy, so, understandably, they had barely had any familial interactions during that time. And now, her brother was returning home over summer break, it seemed.

Well, whatever the case, Nia was but a four-year-old girl, and Neal a six-year-old boy. Sometimes, one would hold pitch-black memories or grudges that could never be erased, like persistent oil stains or dark bloodstains that had seeped into the vulnerable parts of the mind. But I couldn't imagine these siblings had anything like that between them. He was Nia's older brother, and there should be no harm in him returning.

Anyway, I still had to focus on curing my body of this disease. My fight with this parasite still wasn't over yet. *I must continue without breaking focus.*

At least, that was what I thought at the time.

"Ah, he appears to have returned."

Having finished eating breakfast and seeing my parents off, we were out on my usual walk. Though since I was in my wheelchair, Lynokis was still the only one really walking.

The tigerless lily that had been planted around my first outdoor excursion was slowly but surely growing inside the pot. One of the gardeners, whether out of their own consideration or because Lynokis had persuaded them, had prepared it especially for me, even though there was really no need for it.

As I was gazing at that flower, Lynokis pointed up at the sky.

I looked up and saw a small airship with a somewhat nostalgic antique aesthetic descending slowly from the sky towards the edge of the island, approaching the Liston family estate, a plume of cloudlike smoke coming from its tail end.

"It's made of wood. Is this an old model?" I had seen plenty of airships by this point—Nia's parents went off to work and came back on one every day.

"Only the outside. The inside is designed more like a modern airship."



“Hmm, I see. Is this just my brother’s taste then?”

“Yes. The master and mistress gifted it to him to celebrate entering Altoire Academy. They said that it was designed according to Young Master Neal’s tastes.”

Not bad. I didn’t know what kind of brother he was, but I didn’t dislike his taste, at least.

From what I had seen, airships nowadays were completely metallic on the outside. Who would even think of flying in the sky with such a hunk of metal? And my parents went off to work in one of those things every day. Those monstrosities shouldn’t even be able to fly! I had to commend my parents’ dedication to their professions.

Seriously though, how were such big lumps of metal able to fly in the sky? What a terrifying era this was. Leave the skies to jokes about sending people flying with the palm of your hand.

Though technically that was a possible feat for a skilled martial artist, so maybe it was wrong to call it a joke.

I wanted to return to my room already, but thinking it good timing, Lynokis decided to wait for Neal instead. We slowly made our way around the well-maintained garden, and after confirming that the blue-winged birds living by the pond had their bellies filled again today, we headed back towards the mansion.

Standing in front of the entrance and speaking with Jayes was a boy dressed prim and proper next to an unfamiliar attendant.

That had to be Neal and his attendant.

“Nia?!”

The boy had been chatting away about something just a moment before, but upon hearing the sound of my wheelchair, he noticed my presence and came dashing up.

“I’d heard you were feeling better now, but is it really true?”

“Welcome home, dear brother. My condition isn’t bad, I’d say.”

Neal nodded enthusiastically as he looked me up and down, though my body was still weak and emaciated. He genuinely seemed surprised. Even to a child, Nia must have looked like she was on death's doorstep when he had left for the dorms.

And it was true; it very much had been a precarious situation.

Actually, given the real Nia wasn't safe, the reality was that only half of her had been saved. The only thing that survived was the body that I had forced back to life.

"You're tired from your trip, no? How about you go and get changed?"

"Oh, uh, okay. I'll do that. Let's catch up later then, yeah?" With his surprise still not abated, Neal somewhat hesitantly agreed to my suggestion and headed off. Jayes and Neal's attendant chased after him with his luggage.

"Hm."

My eye was caught by the movements of Neal's maid. She was fairly strong herself. In fact, she looked like she'd had a little more training than Lynokis. Though as per usual, defeating her would have been easier than snapping a few twigs.

"Are you curious about Lynette?" Lynokis asked me upon seeing where my eyes were looking.

"Is Lynette the name of that attendant?"

"Indeed. We were both in the same year during our time at Altoire, and we graduated from the Department of Adventuring together. We were sometimes in the same party back then."

*I see, so the two of them are were actually acquainted—acquainted enough to form adventuring parties together.*

I pondered to myself for a moment.

*Nope, still not possible.*

Even if Lynokis, Lynette, and Jayes were to all take me on together, I would still end up winning against them from my wheelchair with just my left hand.

With that in mind...

My own strength may be the problem. Being too strong may actually be a sin.

*Oh, how I wish I could find someone who was at least reasonably strong.*

Five days had passed since Neal had returned to the Liston estate.

“Are you not able to join us at the table yet?”

Neal, kind brother that he was, would frequently pop into my room, trying to give me a distraction—what with all my free time. He was always very attentive to me. He would even tell me all about the academy.

Aside from that, though... I think my brother may have been bored, as well.

Neal Liston.

Though he was only six years old, he was set up to be the successor of the class-four Liston family.

He had inherited the blond hair of his father and the good looks of his mother. He was beautiful for such a young child. That beauty wasn't limited to his surface appearance either. Within those blue eyes of his was a deep wisdom and understanding. I had no doubt this boy was going to make many girls cry in the future. If he wasn't already, that is.

What a terrifying child.

I imagined that when Nia was struck with illness, their parents' attention often turned to her over Neal. The fact he hadn't let jealousy take over him despite his young age said a lot for how good of a brother he was.

“Yes, I think it'll still be a bit difficult.”

A lot of my meals were still made up of easily digestible half solids.

Honestly, I was sure I could munch through all kinds of tougher solids soon, but my body could take in a larger quantity of the soft foods, so I had determined that until I had more stamina, this was better for me.

To be honest, this body was still lacking a lot.

I would be able to do something about the illness, but the deterioration of my

body couldn't be fixed without me eating. This was the body of a child who was still growing, after all.

My brother wanted the whole family to be able to sit around the table and eat together, but that wish likely wouldn't come true for about two or three more weeks at the earliest—so near the end of his summer vacation.

“But is it not boring having to spend the whole day sleeping?”

“It's something I have to do.”

Since my brother had started coming to visit more and more, I was only able to do any meditation at night instead of my around-the-clock routine. If you had to ask if I found this lifestyle boring, I would say yes. Back when I first became Nia, I had been thinking far more about not dying than anything else. I didn't have the luxury to be thinking about if I was bored or not. Now that I was recovering smoothly, I had much more time to just think about things.

Starting to see my parents off and going for walks was also the result of me having that freedom now.

“Shouldn't it be all right now?” Neal asked, not me, but Lynokis, who was standing at attention nearby.

“I'm afraid that is not a judgment I can make myself. You would need permission from the master and mistress.”

*Hm? What are they talking about?*

Genuinely curious, I asked about it directly, and Neal turned back to me with a slightly confused look on his face. “Hm? We're talking about magivision. You used to love watching it on the MagiPad, didn't you?”

*M-Magivision? The MagiPad?*

*Wow! This is amazing!*

Neal brought out a clear crystal panel from somewhere. It was a rectangle forty centimeters by thirty centimeters, and it was incredibly thin. It almost looked like a windowpane and was so delicate that I could shatter it into pieces with a headbutt not even enhanced with chi. Its only protection was the

wooden frame it appeared to be fitted into. The frame was also enhanced with magic that allowed it to float in the air and even hover towards a designated area.

When my brother floated that crystal tablet, the...“MagiPad,” next to me, what I saw through it wasn’t my room but a completely different place entirely.

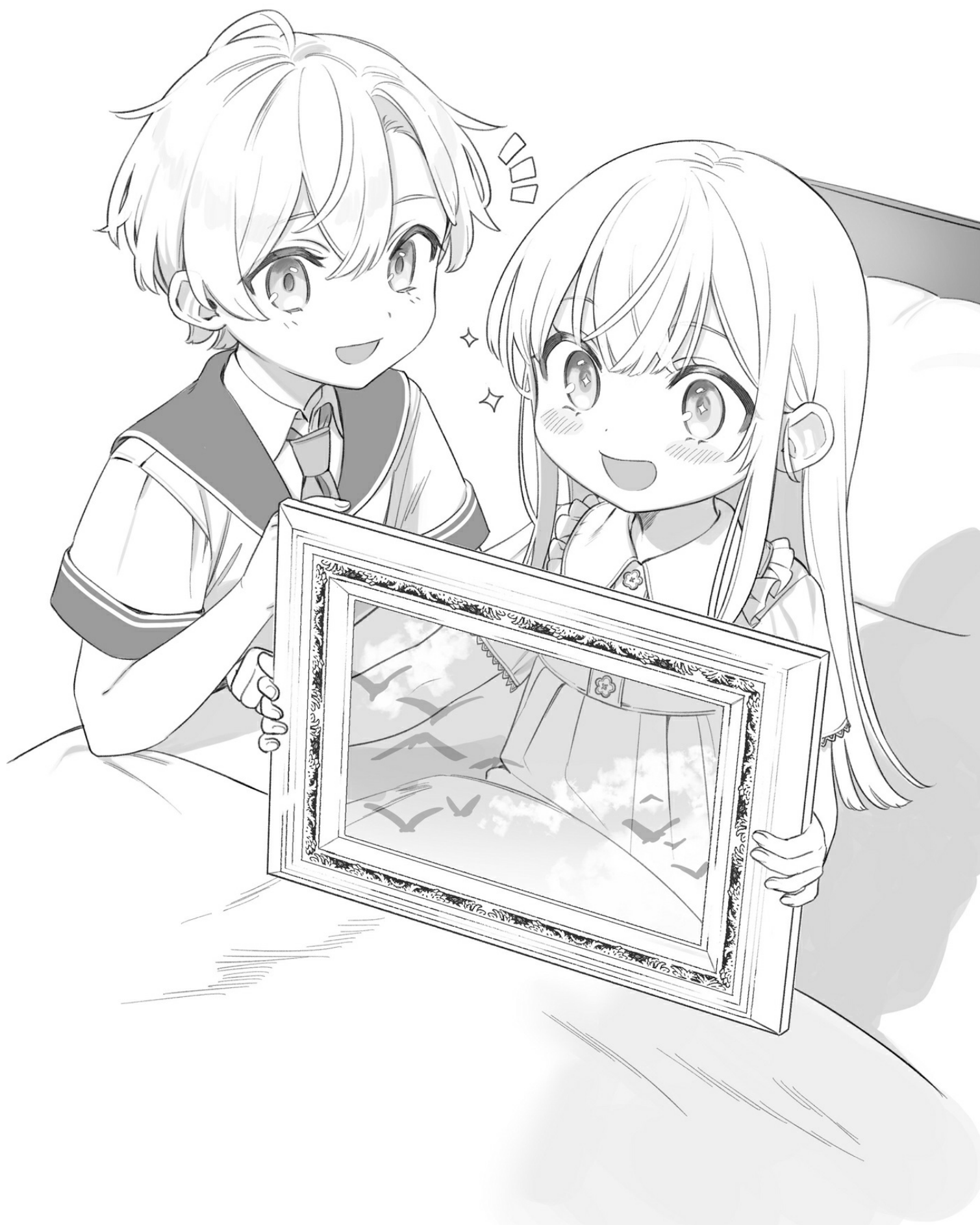
*A world stained red. It must be dusk. A flock of migratory birds are setting off through a line of floating islands sat close together.*

Suddenly it changed and showed completely different scenery.

*This must be some tourist area. We’re beneath an endless flight of stone stairs. I’m curious what’s at the top, but it doesn’t show that far.*

I didn’t understand how it worked or the logic behind it, but it seemed to be a tablet of sorts that would show a window into other parts of the world. I could even hear the sound of string instruments coming from it.





I was quite surprised that this object could emit both picture and sound.

*Given my instinctive reaction, this must be a cultural artifact I'm not aware of.* It was fascinating; it could stave off my boredom *and* help me gain knowledge.

"Since you couldn't go outside, you always loved watching magivision. But because it often depicts scenes that are not for children's eyes, the master forbade you from using it for a while," Lynokis explained.

"Ah, so he did." It was information that Nia should have known, so I nodded as if I remembered. Lynokis seemed to look a tad baffled, but I paid it no mind.

"Father only forbade it because he was afraid that Nia would be shocked by what she saw and worsen her illness. She should be fine now, no?"

What Neal said made perfect sense. Surely with my body recovered this much, it would be fine. If my disease was the issue, I'd been twisting it up, grinding my foot into it, and kicking it all around. It had become quite feeble, already on its last legs. Soon enough, it would stop making any attempt to resist.

There were too many things I didn't know enough about. If I had this magivision, I could learn so much even when confined to my room. I could ask Lynokis about anything I saw, or I could simply commit what I was looking at to memory.

Books were fine too, but their contents were only static accounts of the past. Whether records of true events, fictional stories, theories within specific fields, or simple documents, their contents could be outdated. There would likely be many cases in which the details of the past and the present wouldn't match up. But with this, even if there was some degree of lag, I could get information of the present, and with images attached.

Who would have thought such a convenient tool that I could only dream of existed? Being able to see faraway locations with ease? That was truly unthinkable. It was already an amazing invention, but I could imagine all kinds of ways in which it might develop or find new uses. It was nothing short of a miraculous invention.

I had no idea something like this existed.

Humanity would keep evolving. Take your eyes off it for a second, and you would be completely left behind.

“You’ve struck gold, brother. I’ll make sure to repay you for this.”

“Hm? Okay... I don’t really understand your tone, but, uh...don’t worry about paying me back or anything.”

When Nia’s parents came home from work, I stopped her father and brought up the topic of the magivision. And as a result, I was free to watch it again. He didn’t look pleased by the request, but he didn’t refuse, at least. He was probably still worried about his daughter’s condition.

I heard various curious things about the magivision, but I probably didn’t have to worry about it too much for now.

Though the ban of the magivision had been lifted, and it seemed like it would become an essential part of my life from here...

“Ah, Young Mistress. You shouldn’t be watching magivision at this time,” she’d say.

“Young Mistress, you haven’t gotten permission to see this,” she’d say.

“Young Mistress, no.” It never ended.

“Young Mistress.” All I had to do was hear her voice and I’d know exactly what was going to be asked of me.

*Okay, I get it. I’m putting it away.*

Lynokis placed so many restrictions on my viewing time. Well, technically, they were rules from my parents... Regardless, there was an absurd number of visions I wasn’t allowed to see.

*Floating island explorations are out.*

Those showed adventurers venturing into unexplored land, which meant monsters would appear. Monsters appearing meant that living creatures would die, and sometimes even people. It didn’t help that they would picture blood on top of that.

Honestly, I *really* wanted to watch them. I wanted to see violent scenes of murder and massacre, blood flying everywhere, but alas, I was forbidden from doing so.

*Any and all romances are also off the table.*

That would mean men and women getting a little flirty, talking about how much they missed each other or how they never wanted to see each other again. They'd confess to wanting just one more glimpse, wanting to see themselves reflected in another's eyes. "What's more important, me or work?" "Don't fight over me." A wife frustrated with a cold husband would suddenly catch sight of a young hunk of a delivery man, et cetera, et cetera.

Plays showcasing the love and hatred intrinsic to the annoyances that were human relationships were exceedingly popular, apparently, but were off-limits to me. It was too much for a child to be watching, they said.

Though whether they banned those or not, it wasn't a genre I had any interest in consuming to begin with. Just hearing about it was enough to put me off. It got me frustrated enough I wanted to punch some sense into all of them.

If you love someone, just say that already. In some cases, be forward and push them down. Stop dillydallying. Just say "I like you" or maybe even "I love you."

Though that was all it would take in real life, these plays always made it take hours and hours—days and weeks inside the fictional world itself, sometimes even *years*. In some cases, it would take them until they were of old age, sexual drive still rampant.

I could feel the frustration just from Lynokis explaining them to me. How unnecessarily convoluted. Lynokis would recount them to me in a daze, like a girl dreaming of her own future. Unsurprisingly, she loved this genre.

I really didn't get it.

"All that teasing is just a hassle."

When I let my real thoughts slip, Lynokis gave me a pointed smile and said, "Well, however mature you may be, you *are* still only four years old. You don't understand the subtleties in the heart of an adult who can't just honestly say

their true feelings.”

I felt only humiliation at the response.

I would never let this grudge go.

*Besides that, though, I’m allowed to watch Beautiful Sceneries, where they show breathtaking landscapes from around the world.*

It was one of the few visions I was allowed to watch. Sometimes I’d spy monsters like winged dragons flying off into the distance, which was really quite interesting. I admit, a dragon of that size may have been a bit of a challenge for me with the current state of my body.

Perhaps one day I would find a vision picturing something familiar to me. Though the lack of memories made it hard for me to be aware of what I actually knew.

*And finally, Tales of a Liston Stroll.*

A middle-aged man with a distinctive face would wander around the rural territories that the Liston family owned, trying out each area’s regional foods or visiting their local stores. It was a sort of staged tour. I’d continued watching it because it was surprisingly fun. That didn’t make the host’s face less distracting, though.

Anything else was just the occasional song or dance vision.

Apparently, it hadn’t been long since the invention of this magivision and the MagiPads. There were very few of these moving images, these...“magivision programs,” and there was only one “counterprogram” that Lynokis mentioned.

There were only two programs running at any given time, meaning there were only two channels. And among those broadcasts, the ones I was allowed to watch numbered even fewer. The programs being aired were so few in number that there were already a lot of rebroadcasts. Sometimes, there would be no new programs at all in a whole day.

In other words, though I had gained a new source of information in the form of this magivision, there had been little change in my life, since the programs I could watch were limited and there were so many rebroadcasts.



And so my usual life routine continued: I would see my parents off to work every morning, meditate in my fight against the disease, then take a walk in the garden.

Since there was a restriction placed on the shows I could watch, this culture of magivision smoothly entered my life without interfering much with anything else I had been doing.

*Though I still think there is much to gain from this, regardless.*

With my knowledge of the outside world being so minimal, I couldn't ask for a better source of information than the MagiPad Neal had introduced me to. I wanted to show my appreciation to him for working to give me this opportunity, and I had already decided what I was going to do.

Ever since he had returned to the mansion, Neal had been training in swordsmanship. He would spar with Lynette day after day with a wooden sword, and every time, he would get beaten down.

It was a fairly strict regimen, and I very much approved of the sight. If you didn't approach your training as seriously and authentically as Neal, your body wouldn't learn anything. What you had learned in your mind wouldn't be useful at all in a real fight. If you were approaching it as a martial warrior rather than viewing it as a simple aristocratic pastime, you had to go at it this intensively.

Honestly, he could afford to go at it a little harder... Wait, no, he was only six. It was a bit early for the training to go any further.

Neal often trained at the time when I went for my daily walk, so I frequently got the chance to observe.

If I wanted to say anything, it had to be now.

A while after I started watching, Neal was knocked to the ground. He was so out of breath he couldn't stand back up. Now that there was time for a little break, I called out to him. "May we speak for a moment?"

Neal was still but six years of age. Not only had he not finished growing and developing his body, he was still lacking in many areas. Lynette appeared to be holding back, but even then, he was greatly struggling to match her. That's not

to say I couldn't very easily take her down with just one finger, though. But there was no point at all in me doing that at this moment. I didn't have the time to be doing meaningless things, so I would pass for now.

"Brother, a sword is not something you simply hit against a target. You move it forwards and backwards to slice with the blade. If you don't do that, the blade will shatter."

Given Neal was completely relying on the weight of his tiny frame to swing his sword, I actually thought he was moving well despite his age. He was increasing the strength behind each of his blows by leaning his weight into them, utilizing his body that still lacked much muscle. It was a style where each and every blow was heavy, not something that could be done consecutively.

I wasn't sure if the reason he'd gone with this style was because he was aiming for a way to finish matches in one blow, or if it was simply done out of necessity to try and make up for what he lacked.

It should be fine to give him even just one hint.

"Y-Young Mistress!"

When I stood up from my wheelchair, Lynokis, the unfamiliar Lynette, and the still-prone Neal were looking over at me in shock.

Now hold on a moment, why Lynokis? She already knew I could stand on my own. Hell, I would use the bathroom on my own at night. Why so surprised?

Ignoring the stares aimed my way, I picked up the wooden sword that Neal had been using.

*Even a small, light sword made for a child feels heavy to me. This body is still so weak.*

"Hold the sword parallel to the ground, please."

"What? Ah, um, y-yes, Young Mistress Nia..."

Lynette was somewhat befuddled, but even through the befuddlement, she did as I said, holding her wooden sword straight.

"Swords are not made to simply hit..."

I raised the weapon.

Not only was my body smaller than my brother's, it was also *weaker* than my brother's, so my limit would likely be a single satisfactory strike.

*So you better make sure you watch closely.*

Grip the sword in both hands. Raise it right above your head so you can swing it straight down.

Steady your breathing. Temper your chi. Quietly take one step forwards.

"But to cut!"

*Thwack.*

The sound of wood clashing resonated through the garden.

I swung the sword down with proper form and pulled back to cut with the blade. Or at least, I should have. The wooden sword had vanished from my grip.

*Hmm... Even supporting my body with chi doesn't allow it a single good strike.*

Lodged inside Lynette's sword where she still remained poised was the wooden sword that I had swung down. The wooden blade was not sharp, but it had still cut through half of it. Had I been able to grip it properly, I would have been able to cut it clean in two. It had slid right out of my hands with how weak my grip strength was.

This was pretty commendable for the present state of my body, though. Weapons were never my forte, anyway. I could cut much better with my bare hands.

"Ngh."

When the adrenaline faded from my body, I almost collapsed. I must have hit my physical limit with that strike. Never mind my muscles; my stamina was horrendous.

Before I fully landed on the ground, Lynokis swiftly caught me from behind and returned me to my wheelchair. *Sorry, Lynokis. Maybe I tried a bit too much too soon.*

My body was overridden with fatigue, and I let out a breath as I lay back

against my wheelchair.

“The structure of weapons is very logical. Over the years, the desire for more efficiency and weapons more specialized for certain tasks has led to their current forms, after all. Whew.” I paused to catch my breath. “If you wish to pursue a style in which you mindlessly put all your strength into your hits, I don’t believe you need to restrict yourself to a sword. A mace or just something sturdier with a little more weight to it would be better... Hah.”

The biggest problem before even considering the kind of weapon, though, was that his body wasn’t even developed. However, it was exactly because his body still wasn’t quite developed that deepening his knowledge of a weapon’s characteristics, features, advantages, and disadvantages served as a good way to get stronger outside of just physical strength.

Learn the weapon.

That is also the martial way.

It also depended on what Neal himself wanted to become in the future, so I didn’t want to say anything too presumptuous.

*My body’s really not taking this well. I can’t get my breath back...*

“Apologies for the interruption... Lynokis, let’s go.”

I said my farewells to my brother and Lynette, who was still standing there in shock, and left the training area.

This body really was weak.

I had forcefully moved my body with chi rather than relying on any muscle, but the burden had been massive. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that the range of movement my body could handle was small. My mobility was limited.

Just how much more time would I need until I could live like a regular person?

*Honestly. It bothers me a little less if I think of it as me training to use my chi, but...*

For a child, this was way too tough of a life. I couldn’t help but linger on the

pain Nia had no doubt had to endure before I entered her body.

## Chapter 4: A Pivotal Winter

Altoire Academy would soon enter its winter break.

My breakfast was lined up on my bed just as it had been every previous day.

Neal had returned to the academy after his summer vacation ended, but now he would be returning home once more. It was then that Lynokis raised a suggestion to me: “Young Mistress, do you not think you are well enough now to return to the table?”

*Now that the cold is becoming much harsher, it may be about time to begin proper training for my body.* The suggestion had come just as I had been thinking such a thought.

Return to the table—as in, return to the table at which my family would eat their meals together.

What had been easily digestible meals for an invalid had already transitioned into a menu of many common solids, and I had no complaints about my portions as a child who had turned five just last month.

The life-sucking coughs had recently disappeared entirely. The sickness had retreated so that I was now able to walk around myself—within the mansion, at least. My body was still notably weak, but that could be easily remedied with the appropriate training.

Allow me to be clear: I was no longer some frail child. I was a child whose body was simply a little weak after a long recovery.

*I think I’m well enough to return to a regular lifestyle.* Nia Liston would finally overcome her illness. As I thought, I would not die from disease.

Strength truly was a sin. Oh, how I wished I could experience defeat.

Ever since I had gained access to magivision and the MagiPad that my brother had helped me acquire over the summer, my life hadn’t had any huge changes.

I watched the garden gently changing its hues to match the seasons, and as I did, my weakened body gained more and more strength through the daily chi meditations and my continued regular meals. My focus on those daily motions allowed me to finally take down the disease.

The doctor's evaluation of my condition was good and showed no further signs of issue, so it was likely fine for me to put an end to living like a patient.

"Should I get approval at my next examination, let's do away with me having to remain laid up," I said.

"I'll inform the master in that case," Lynokis said with a smile on her face. "Also, um... I kind of want to see a demonstration again today..."

"Afterwards, okay?"

Breakfast first. If I didn't hurry up, I'd miss seeing my parents off.

I turned on the MagiPad and had it float beside my bed. Eating breakfast while watching *Tales of a Liston Stroll* had become the norm for me by this point.

*Oh, today isn't a rebroadcast.*

The host with the distinctive face was calmly narrating as he wandered down a countryside path.

"Ah, this is near my home," Lynokis said in surprised excitement.

Oh, wow.

*"Now this is delicious."*

The host was enjoying some of the local wine in Lynokis's hometown.

*"And what is this here? Cheese? Oh my, now this must be delicious. I can tell just from the smell."*

He really was noisy. That's what happens when you drink first thing in the morning. "This man has done nothing but drink alcohol lately," I grumbled.

I felt like I'd been seeing nothing but that from him recently. Two out of three scenes had him drinking alcohol. I was jealous. Wait, no, I mean, how unprofessional...



I was jealous.

I wanted to have a drink myself, you know! Did he spare no thought for the viewers at home? I would have to wait over a whole decade before I could even have my first *sip* of alcohol.

Cheese. Alcohol. Alcohol. Cheese. Alcohol poured by a pretty lady. Cheese. Alcohol. Alcohol. Alcohol. Picking souvenirs, cheeks rosy with booze. Pretty ladies. Pretty ladies. Pretty girls. An old lady. Alcohol.

He was getting to do whatever he wanted with that distinctive face of his.

What a disgraceful show to air in the morning. I was jealous. I really was jealous!

“I’ve heard that products shown on magivision can see a big boost in their sales,” Lynokis noted, excited.

The viewers of the show would buy up the alcohol and cheese the host was so greedily consuming. In other words, one should expect to see the effects of such publicity.

I couldn’t deny that watching this strange-faced man enjoying alcohol like it was the best thing he’d ever tasted made me also want to have some.

“I wonder if father thinks this appropriate.” I continued to complain as I watched the man happily consuming every last morsel of what was presented to him, and as I did so, I picked at my own breakfast in front of me. A much weaker-tasting meal, to be frank.

And so after seeing my parents off once more, another day began.

Evening rolled around. Looking back, this winter’s day really was the turning point for many things.

“Nia.”

My parents had come to my room. After hearing what Lynokis had to say, they had come to check on my condition.

“You’ve likely heard already, but...” I went on to tell them about how my disease was now completely gone, about how I had already graduated from a

liquid diet a while ago, and that I wanted to stop living as a sick person.

“I know that both of you are busy every day. I don’t want to keep worrying you like this.”

My parents had returned home late again today. They must have heard my message as soon as they arrived back home, as they had come to my room still dressed in their work suits. They always left for work so early, and yet they would return so late. Though we were far into the evening, this was an earlier return than usual.

Pretending my disease might be contagious, I did everything I could to not meet with them and refused as many of their visits as possible. I made sure to see them off every morning, but that meant that that was the only communication we really had. I made sure to tell them in plain words that I wanted to stop living in such a way.

My mother and father looked at each other and nodded.

“If that’s what you’ve decided, Nia, then go ahead,” my father said.

“We respect your decision on the matter. If you think you feel okay now, then give it a try,” my mother added.

They sat on opposite sides of my bed, and both came in for a hug.

*I feel a little guilty that I’m the one receiving this love and not Nia herself.*

“By the way, Nia, are you up for what we spoke about before?”

Naturally, I remembered what they were talking about...and I had steeled myself for it.

“About me making an appearance on magivision? I’m perfectly fine with it.”

For some reason, Lynokis gave a small squeal of delight at my response. As a magivision buff, I’m sure she would love nothing more than to get to star on magivision herself...

Everything started one year ago.

It happened shortly after the already frail Nia had come down with a bad

illness, and even after being seen by various doctors, there seemed to be no hope of treatment, and she could only await her death.

Nia's parents had put a call out on a magivision program that they were looking for a way to cure Nia of her disease. As it turned out, the broadcasting station for one of the two magivision channels was Liston family-run.

Her parents' job was the production of magivision programs on the Liston Broadcasting Channel. In other words, they quite literally ran the organization. The reason they were busy every day was work connected to magivision.

The number of magivision channels was tied to the number of territories who had broadcasting rights, which at the moment only numbered two: the Royal Capital of Altoire and the class-four Liston territories. Nia's parents had immediately jumped at the chance to nab themselves a channel, sensing the potential for the field.

Creating and recording programs, producing MagiPads, and then broadcasting those programs on said MagiPads all cost money that the average person didn't have, so the industry hadn't really spread that far yet, though many aristocratic families and organizations were buying MagiPads to observe the market and see if they should enter it.

Apparently, Nia's parents had used their connections, authority, and financial power to their fullest to dive headfirst into the industry and get the rights to a channel even when the tools and techniques were still very much in their testing phases.

My only image of my parents was of their calm, peaceful selves, so this knowledge very much made me realize that they likely had two very different sides: one for at home and one for business. Personally, they were visionaries with extraordinary talent for their work, having a strict and assertive side to them.

That aside, though, magivision and the MagiPads were amazing inventions.

I was a complete beginner with magic tools, but even I could tell that there were endless possibilities to be achieved with these crystal frames. Were I to be a bit more shameless, I'd say it smelled of piles of cash.

It was still far too new as an invention, however, and too expensive for many to want to jump on the bandwagon, so most potential buyers were still keeping an eye on it. At the current point in time, it was spreading at a very gradual pace.

*Well, whether I understand all of this aside, they don't talk about their work very much to their children, so there's still a lot I don't know.*

Nia's parents felt they had the duty to report to their audience just how their daughter's treatment had gone after taking advantage of their power to broadcast across the whole of the Kingdom of Altoire that they were looking for a way to cure their daughter.

As a result of them putting out that call for help through their broadcast, at the very end, as Nia was halfway across death's door, a strange hooded man had appeared and extended her life for a few days in a very temporary way—most likely done through forbidden means. Unbeknownst to them, it ultimately hadn't been a real solution.

I was the one who just so happened to be summoned and given the role of dying once again.

*This whole string of affairs was a complete miracle.*

None of what happened here originally had any connection to me. Due to my soul miraculously being connected to Nia's body, I had managed to chase away the grim reaper who was so relentlessly after her.

I had no memories. I had even forgotten my name. My knowledge of this world was shaky at best, and I had no way to look into the memories of this body either. In other words, I was a total stranger.

But I, the soul called by chance, had still been able to use chi.

I had known how to cure Nia's disease. If I had not been trained in the manipulation of chi, I would most certainly have experienced a second death in Nia's body. The probability of this happening was so unthinkably small. This was a miracle that should never have happened.

This miracle that out of all the slumbering souls, the one who had been called was myself, someone who could actually cure her...was it a twist of fate? Or

was this whole chain of events preordained by a higher power?

Though I could assume I was called at random, I felt it more appropriate to think I was guided here.

*Or perhaps it could be that I was just too strong?*

Because I was so criminally powerful, I was entrusted with this unfortunate one's life... That was one way of thinking of the situation, no?

Hm.

When you think about it, it didn't seem like there was a more suitable reason than this. No, this had to be the case. I had just been too strong...

Jokes aside, this wasn't something that would ever escape the realm of speculation, so the reason didn't wholly matter. More importantly, as a result of Nia's parents putting out that call for help through their broadcast, at the very end, as Nia was halfway across death's door, I had entered her body and healed it, leaving me no choice but to live as this girl.

They were now going to use magivision to announce Nia's recovery to the whole kingdom.

My parents wanted me to appear on magivision and let the audience hear the news from the girl herself. She had in fact recovered from her illness and was alive and well.

Honestly, if I refused, I was sure they would try to find a different way to go about it, but I knew I could do it, so I had no reason to. Especially since this was her parents' wish, I absolutely had to take on the role of Nia and do this. Since, conversely, my duty now that I had received this girl's body was to be a good child for her parents.

And so, it was decided that I would appear on magivision and report my survival to the kingdom.

Just as we left the mansion to go on my walk, Lynokis immediately handed me a wooden sword.

"Please, if you would!"

“Yes, yes.” I stood up from my wheelchair and, in a single motion, silently sliced the wooden pole that she held parallel to the ground.

*I am...so tired of this.*

Today again I showed Lynokis her favorite move by cutting a wooden pole with a wooden sword. You couldn't even call it a move useful enough for rehab. Ever since I had showed the move to Neal when he came back to the mansion over his break, she kept asking me to do it.

“Where did you learn to do something like this?” my maid asked as she gazed at the cross section of the pole. She had also already asked this numerous times.

“I suddenly knew how to do it without realizing. Maybe I read about it in a book.”

“But, Young Mistress, you still struggle to read difficult letters, no?”

“There are plenty of picture books.”

“Picture books don't instruct people on how to cut a pole in two with just a wooden sword.”

“You shouldn't ask a lady about her secrets.”

“Y-You're only five years old...” she stammered.

Did she not know? No matter what age a lady was, she was still a lady. In fact, the real issue here was Lynokis herself and her overwhelming lack of female charm, despite her being around fifteen or sixteen years of age, when we are at our most impressionable and emotional. She loved all the annoyingly sappy love stories, so how was she so completely lacking in femininity?

I sighed as I sat myself back in my wheelchair and looked up at the sky. I could see a small vintage airship in the distance flying through the blue sky of the cold winter air. My brother had returned home. And that meant the filming for the magivision show would soon begin.

I had been told that once my family had all gathered, we would record in front of the mansion.

It went as I expected, yet somehow also faster than I expected.

The day after Neal returned home, a group of people who were called a “production crew” came to the Liston estate to do the recording.

Starting with my parents who had taken the day off work, there were also the returned Neal; myself, who had been given the stamp of approval in terms of being completely cured; and many servants including my attendant, Lynokis, Neal’s attendant, Lynette, and the old butler, Jayes. The main members of the Liston estate were all gathered in front of the mansion, though the servants would really just be here to watch.

The crew was working on getting everything set up in front of all those onlookers.

“Director, mind if we go over the script?” one of the crew asked, stepping forward to talk to my father. He was a middle-aged man with a somewhat distinctive face, and he seemed to be the representative of the production crew.

*Huh...?*

“Young Mistress, Young Mistress! It’s Bendelio! Bendelio, I’m telling you, it’s Bendelio!” Lynokis excitedly whispered into my ear, just as I was thinking to myself that the man looked familiar.

Aha. So this was that wretched man with the unsettling face from *Tales of a Liston Stroll*—the one who drank first thing in the morning without any consideration for the people watching. He was the host, Bendelio, was he?

Seeing him in person, though, he didn’t look as bad as he did on magivision; he just came across as a bit too energetic. He kind of had that feeling of a father trying to make himself look younger and trendier with his fashion sense.

*I see now. It was his makeup that made him look so off-putting.*

Honestly, he looked much cleaner and more refreshed like this, but I guess whoever did his makeup felt they had a reason to cake the stuff on and make him look all greasy.

“You’re Nia, right?” After Bendelio finished his discussion with my father, the



two of them came towards me where I was sat in my wheelchair.

*Wow, it really is him.*

Seeing him up close made it clear to me that he really *was* that Bendelio. His smug caked-up face on magivision honestly kind of irritated me sometimes, but when he was like this, he really did just feel like a friendly older man.

When Bendelio was kind enough to kneel down in front of me, I introduced myself to him. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Bendelio. I’m Nia Liston. I see you on magivision every day.”

As a class-four aristocrat and daughter of the Liston family, I couldn’t afford to be an embarrassment with my answers in any way. I put as much of a “noble lady” attitude into my greeting as I could, as fuzzy as that bit of knowledge may have been in my mind. At the end of the day, though, I was sure they would be more than willing to overlook a child being a little rude.

In any case, it was most important for me to not show hesitation or nervousness. Both would be remarked on. Even if I *was* hesitant or nervous or even felt underpowered in any way, I had to approach this as if I was more than a match for him. That was the bare minimum mental state you must face a strong opponent with. Not that Bendelio was that strong, anyway.

*Well, it’s not as if I’m hesitant or nervous in the first place, and I’m more than strong enough for this. In fact, what’s more annoying is the way I can feel Lynokis’s nerves from all the way over here.*

“Oh my, every day?”

My greeting was not particularly lively or upbeat as I said it, but it gave off a refined and intelligent air that not all children possessed. Bendelio gave a satisfied nod, as did my father. Good, that meant I had not caused any insult. I had not blundered either. For now, at least.

“What do you think about the show?”

“It is relaxing and peaceful. I quite enjoy it. But have there not been a bit too many drinking segments recently?”

“I can’t deny that at all; in fact, I agree with you,” Bendelio responded with a

wry smile. He really did have a distinctive face. “But the viewers all love seeing a region’s alcohol and its specialties. The distributors’ sales always go up after the show.”

Lynokis had mentioned that too—the effects of publicity.

It wasn’t as if I didn’t understand where he was coming from. When I watched Bendelio drinking his mornings away, I wanted to have a drink too. There would be people like me who would be able to actually make the purchase.

“Nia, did you memorize the script?”

“Yes, father.”

My parents were the ones who had written my speech. I had simply memorized the words. It was short, so it was barely any trouble.

“Director, what would you like to do about Nia’s makeup?” one of the crew—a woman with makeup products in hand—asked.

“The weather is good today, so there shouldn’t be a need for any,” my father responded.

So there was makeup to make you look good on magivision, after all. That would explain Bendelio, then.

“What should we do about, um...her hair color...?”

The hesitant question was likely asked because my hair was so completely different from my parents’. My hair was still gray—the color that it had become after Nia lost most of her life.

“Well...” My father hesitated.

“I’m fine keeping it like this.” I supplied my own opinion, since my father seemed uncertain as to what the best choice was. If he was going to hesitate, then I could only ask that he respect my thoughts on the matter. “This hair is proof of the battle I fought against my disease. It is nothing to be embarrassed about.”

And this wasn’t just about me. This was a scar left behind after *Nia*’s battle, proof that she existed. I didn’t know if I would always have white hair. I may have this hair color for life. But regardless, I had no intentions of hiding or

feeling embarrassed about the scars that were hers to bear.

“All right. If you’re truly okay with it, Nia, then let’s leave it as it is.”

The preparations for the recording were complete.

There was a black box that was kept standing by some legs that looked a little like a stepladder’s. Apparently, it was something called a “camera.” They would record the video through the glass attached to the camera—the “lens”—so I had to make sure I looked at that.

My mother and father stood immediately behind me, Neal beside, and I was sat in the middle with my wheelchair. The main servants of the Liston family were lined up behind us. I thought they were just going to spectate, but it turned out they were going to be recorded as well.

Now that recording was about to begin, the servants were clearly starting to get nervous. Even though they wouldn’t have to say a word, you could hear throats being cleared from all around.

My parents looked perfectly fine. Were they used to this because of their job? Neal, however...looked a little nervous.

I was also perfectly fine. The period of time when I’d just transferred into Nia’s body and had to learn how to act like her had been significantly more thrilling and nerve-racking than this. Anything was better than death. And even then, I’d technically already died once. With that in mind, there was no nervousness, and my feelings wouldn’t be swayed. It would be one hell of an achievement to make *me* nervous.

“All right, we’re going to start recording! Look at the camera please!” Bendelio, standing beside the camera, had his right hand raised and was counting down with his fingers. When he made it to zero, it was a signal for recording to start.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Ornitt Liston, current head of the Liston family.” My father proudly declared that his daughter had been cured of disease and gave his thanks for all the support shown during that time. My mother and Neal also gave a few words of their own.

When they were done speaking, if going by the script, the camera would supposedly turn to me. Though I couldn't see any change from my end.

I recited the words from the script in a manner not particularly lively or upbeat, but in a way that gave off a refined and intelligent air that not all children possessed. And with that, Bendelio yelled, "CUT!" and the filming was stopped.



It felt strange, but the filming for the announcement was almost done already.

*Well, at least that means my duty is done. I'm exhausted.*

In hindsight, my parents had likely expected there to be some kind of groundbreaking effect from this whole state of affairs. Of course it wasn't a lie that they wanted to save Nia—she was their family, after all—or that they had put in all the effort they could to save her, and this was the result. It was an undeniable truth.

But.

A girl who had been so ill that she was on her deathbed had been cured. The reaction to this reality would be far from small.

Many people considering getting into the magivision market had been observing to see if it was viable in the long term, and now there was an actual case of a girl whose doctors gave up on her but was saved through the reach of this new tool.

Those results would convince many entrepreneurs, investors, and aristocrats with their own territories of the possibilities and massive profits to be gained from magivision. The magivision culture that had previously been steadily broadening its hold would have explosive growth from here.

And, over time, I...

"All right, Nia, we're counting on you!"

Yes, yes. I stood up from my wheelchair and walked in front of the camera.

"3, 2, 1, and..."

The director's fingers were all lowered, the signal for the start of recording.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Today on *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation*, I have come to visit the forge of a sword restorationist."

I had been asked to take part in even more programs in order to further propel the popularity of magivision.

*“Roughly a year ago, my daughter, Nia, collapsed due to illness. We desperately followed up all manner of rumors on doctors, magic physicians, and authorities in herbology. We even chased treatments that sounded like nothing more than folk tales, but nothing could help, and her condition only worsened.”*

Usually, this man would have a smile friendly enough to fool anyone whether in public or in private, but on this occasion, he was entirely sincere, his handsome face pulled tight.

Ornitt Liston, a class-four aristocrat: He was the only son of his father, Kadett Liston, who had become bedridden after an airship accident. Ornitt had stepped in to take his father’s place during his recovery. Ornitt was still young, having only become thirty-one this year, young for a man of the state.

However, he had clear talent.

There was a time when he had been clumsy and unreliable, but he had overcome that. Seeing his efforts, though it was a little early, Kadett saw it as a good time to have his son inherit the title of Liston family head.

That was six years ago.

Nowadays, the previous family head was retired and living on a floating island on the edge of the Liston territories.

Vikson Silver, class-five aristocrat, was jealous of such a life.

“Ugh, today is just as boring.”

Reliared, the youngest daughter of the Silver family, was watching Ornitt Liston’s speech on the MagiPad, the scathing look in her eyes far too mature for a five-year-old. Vikson’s other daughters weren’t even looking at it. They were either too focused on eating their breakfast or were chatting between themselves, deciding on what to do for the day.

Vikson would turn fifty this year. Being the same age as Kadett, he, too, wished to hurry up and have someone succeed the role of the Silver family head so he could live in retirement himself. However, with a family of only daughters, that was a wish that would not be granted anytime soon.

Yes, he had nothing but daughters. Four of them, at that.



What was more, his eldest daughter had turned twenty-seven and still showed no interest or desire to get married, instead single-mindedly throwing herself into starting up her own fashion label.

Watching his daughters around the dining table, Vikson gave a quiet sigh.

It would still be a long time until he found a successor.

Vikson had once wanted to become an adventurer. He had wanted to spend his days exploring unknown islands, making all kinds of discoveries, battling monsters, and going on various unexpected adventures that would leave his heart racing.

Having been born as the eldest son of the class-five Silver family, however, he realized this would never be allowed of him, and he had shoved that desire deep inside his heart and sealed it shut.

But what had revived that adventurer's spirit within him once again was the magivision.

His youngest daughter may have called it boring, but those "boring" visions had greatly resonated with Vikson. Especially the ones that would sometimes air showing the adventurer's life.

Vikson had been advised to enter the magivision industry, but he knew absolutely nothing about it. Under the authority of the king, the Kingdom of Altoire had started this endeavor full of promise. Out of obligation, Vikson had purchased an expensive MagiPad like a fool, but he had no idea what to do with it, even if he had it explained to him. It was something about broadcasting, and being able to see faraway sceneries...or something.

If he wanted to see something far away, then he would just go visit it himself. Most lords nowadays at least owned an airship, and for the citizens, there were rental airship services. Actually, there were even commoners that had their own airships nowadays. It wasn't rare to see small airships that could seat one or two people anymore. In fact, the maids of the Silver family used these small airships to pick up groceries.

Long journeys no longer took the energy and time that they used to, so if one wanted to see a faraway sight and could go there directly, they may as well do

that.

At least, that was what he had thought.

But unlike sceneries, you couldn't simply fly off to see an adventurer on an exploration. Given his position, Vikson wasn't permitted to go to the dangerous unexplored floating islands either. It was this magivision that had, in some form, granted his wish to become an adventurer.

Vikson's body was already old and wrinkled, but the adventurer's spirit he'd had since childhood would always get excited. He would prepare some alcohol to watch the programs with, but he would be so engrossed in watching what was happening that he would forget to drink any of it.

When was it again that he had secretly begun thinking to himself that he would like to start up a broadcasting company in the Silver territories?

It just cost so much that he couldn't justify ever going ahead with it.

No matter how much he wanted to, not even all of the Silver family's savings could fund such a project. He had even thought to himself that Ornitt Liston's own entry into the magivision industry had been too hasty.

In this type of business, if you waited a while, the costs would decrease. Understanding how to enter a market ahead of others and make a profit was a difficult skill to master.

But here the Liston family was with their *Tales of a Liston Stroll*.

It wasn't outright *pointless*. But as his daughter said, it was a little boring. There was just no excitement to it. It was a program that only the older generation would really enjoy. Well, being part of the older generation himself, Vikson was quite often ordering in local brews and specialties, but still.

"Ah..."

Vikson had been having fantasies recently of starting up his own broadcasting station and airing all kinds of adventuring shows. But those fantasies were interrupted by his youngest daughter suddenly making a sound. When he turned his consciousness away from said fantasies and back to reality, he saw Ornitt Liston's son displayed on the MagiPad.

Vikson nodded.

Though he was a child, still not even in his teens, he had a beautiful face, one that assured everyone he already had his future promised to him—a future of making girls cry.

Vikson's youngest daughter appeared to have taken a liking to him, what with them being around the same age.

*Please, can just one of you marry a boy or at least marry into another family?* He silently prayed to his daughter who was still only five years of age. Vikson was aware that he would become the target of all of his daughters' ire were he to say anything aloud, though.

And then, a pale young girl, the one who had fully recovered from her illness, was displayed on the screen, sitting in her wheelchair.

Her skin was so pale she still looked ill, and her white, almost gray, hair brought to mind mana exhaustion. She was wearing a white frilly dress as if coordinating with her natural appearance. The girl looked so ephemeral, body so horribly weak and fragile that she looked as if she would break if one were to just touch her or blow away if you were to even breathe on her.

Even through the MagiPad, those clear blue eyes looked right through Vikson.

At that moment, something flitted through Vikson's mind.

*Is this...really a child?*

Perhaps it was because Ornitt Liston's son who had been pictured just a moment before had clearly been nervous, as you would expect a child to be, but the calm with which this pale girl approached the situation felt so unnatural.

She had a majestic stability and complete lack of nervousness that made one question if she truly was a child. It did bring to mind an aristocrat, but an older one who had experienced much of the world. That was not the expression of a young girl.

"That girl..."

Suddenly, Vikson realized that all his daughters were looking at the MagiPad

too. The one who had started speaking was his oldest daughter. She continued, “Why is she wearing such lame clothes?”

Vikson wasn’t that knowledgeable on fashion, but he thought that all aristocrat children wore that kind of attire.

“That girl...” The next to speak was his second daughter, who had just turned twenty. “I like her. She’s cute. Her brother too. Siblings. Siblings, and both beautiful kids. Hee hee hee. My fantasies...they’re going crazy.”

She had loved drawing since she was small, and she still drew to this day. But he wasn’t really sure what kind of things she was drawing nowadays. Vikson was sure that if his daughter had been a man, she’d have been arrested on the spot for the creepy smile she had on her face right now...and the strange laughter too.

Vikson didn’t really think marriage would be possible for her anytime soon.

“That girl...” Now it was his third daughter, fifteen years old and entering Altoire High School next year. “She looks strong. Very much so.”

His third daughter was currently obsessed with practicing the Heavenstriker style of martial arts, and what she said made as much sense as his second daughter. Who would look at a girl who was so small and emaciated and think she was strong? Vikson couldn’t understand.

“Wow...” And last to speak was his youngest. “Is that girl in the white dress five? That means she’s the same age as me.”

Now that was a much more normal response.

It was only a few months later when he realized such a normal response was exactly what would cause a hassle later.

“Father!” Vikson’s youngest daughter had recently been watching the MagiPad with a very unhappy face during breakfast, and she finally exploded. “I want to appear on magivision just like Nia Liston!”

Since Ornitt Liston’s broadcasted public thanks, the little girl Nia Liston had been appearing on magivision more and more.

With these new programs that were aimed at a completely different age group, the Silver family's youngest daughter had been completely entranced. Because they were the same age, she naturally felt like she wanted to compete against her. She was fueled by jealousy, and the complete self-confidence that she was better than Nia.

Admittedly, this may partly have been because he had spoiled her as an aristocrat's daughter. But even with the biased view of a father, Vikson didn't particularly think his daughter was losing to Nia Liston.

It was almost certainly this moment that led to the birth of the Red Idol who was known to rival even Nia Liston, Reliared Silver.

## Chapter 5: Magivision Performance

A few days had passed since I had announced my recovery on magivision. With the winter days only getting colder, I began some light indoor exercise now that I was free from the devil of illness. And when I say light, I mean *light*.

My body was still so weak I couldn't even run, and I could barely even stand for long periods of time. Despite how far I'd come, I still couldn't recreate even one ten-thousandth of the strength of my past life's fists. Honestly, I think if I had even tried, all the bones in my body would have shattered and torn through all my muscles and tendons.

*There is no need to rush.*

I would be entering Altoire Academy the year after next. We may have already been near the end of the year, but that still meant there was over a year left to me before then. That was my deadline for ensuring my body could handle a regular lifestyle.

It would be bothersome if I ended up destroying my body right after recovering from illness because I went too far in training, so it was important that I take my time and be careful.

With the broadcast of my recovery, the Liston family had managed to gain closure for this whole situation, but it wasn't as if my lifestyle changed much after that. The only notable change was that I now ate breakfast with my parents at the dining table.

They didn't come home for lunch, and they didn't have a particular set time to return in the evenings, so we only really ate together if they got back at a reasonable time.

However, Neal was on his winter vacation, so he was able to eat with me for all three meals.

Watching over his sword training from my wheelchair had also become a daily

routine.

I idly chatted with Lynokis behind me while Neal and Lynette sparred with wooden swords.

“Young Master Neal has gotten much stronger recently, don’t you think?”

“Compared to last summer, yes, he has.”

Compared to when I previously saw him, his movements had improved greatly, especially the skill of wielding the weapon itself. He was clearly keeping the sword, its form, and the concept of a sticklike shape at the forefront of his mind. That was allowing him to wield it with much more finesse.

And to think that only half a year earlier, he had simply been swinging the sword around relying on nothing more than the strength of his body. Though his current movements were that of a small child, they were almost certainly the movements of a swordsman as well.

Indeed, if one’s goal was to cut, then swinging with all your strength was unnecessary. You let the blade rest where you want it to cut, and then slide true. Don’t take an attack head-on; let it move past. *That’s it...* If your body was small and powerless, you should take advantage of that and—

“Young Mistress, some letters have arrived for you.”

*Hm?*

Just as I had been carefully analyzing my brother’s movements, an unfamiliar voice called for me. I turned back and saw a gentle elderly gardener with bundles of letters in both hands—and pretty large bundles at that. They had to be for the whole family.

Over half a year had passed since I became Nia, but this was the first time I had had letters delivered to me. I had only just turned five, and I had made no contact with anyone other than family or relatives, so I didn’t think there was anyone Nia was exchanging letters with, but...

“Allow me to take them,” Lynokis said, receiving one of the stacks from the gardener and then holding it out to me.

What I had thought had been a whole family’s worth of letters was all given



to me. “Wait. They’re all for me?”

Lynokis nodded. “It appears so.”

But who could have sent them? I had absolutely no idea. I could read simple words, at least. Flipping through the twenty or so envelopes and looking at the addressee, all of them said “Nia Liston.” In other words, there was no denying that they really were all for me.

“What about those?” I pointed at the bundle the gardener still held.

“Ah, these are for Young Master Neal. May I ask you to keep a hold of these too, until he’s done?”

The remaining bundle was a little thicker than mine, and apparently they were all for my brother. As he was in the middle of training, Lynokis kept them for now.

“I’ll be returning to my work then,” the gardener said as he headed off.

More importantly, none of the sender’s names on my letters were familiar to me. Though perhaps Nia had known them.

“I wonder what these are.”

“What? Well, it would be *that*, wouldn’t it?”

“*That*”?

“Do you know what these are, Lynokis?”

“Yes, of course.” I really had no idea, but she, with full confidence, said, “They must be fan letters.”

After observing my brother’s training, I returned to my room and immediately cut open each of the envelopes with a letter opener.

*Let’s check out these so-called fan letters, shall we?*

“Congrats on your full recovery.”

“I’m ill too, but I told mom I want to get better just like you one day!”

“I lost a child about your age to an illness a few years ago. I couldn’t help but

be reminded of that loss, so before I knew it, I was writing you a letter.”

“You’re cute. Marry me.”

“I haven’t been able to forget about you since I laid eyes on you. When will you appear on magivision again?”

“Oh, my dear, pure white, adorable angel. Let’s exchange letters.”

“Cute little girl! Cute little girl!”

“This is a letter from the devil. If you don’t send letters with this exact message to eight more people, you will be possessed.”

“Exactly how much of an age difference is too much? Twenty years isn’t *impossible*, right?”

This was the impact of magivision.

I...wasn’t sure if I could call them fans, but this was society’s reaction to the knowledge of my, no, Nia Liston’s survival.

Did this...make me happy? Honestly speaking, I had no idea how to feel receiving letters like these. Some of what was written was a bit concerning, so could I really just be...*happy* about this?

Well, for now, I would at least crumple up the letter from “the devil.” That one was most certainly *not* a fan letter. Even someone sheltered would be able to tell that much.

But the rest of this pile of letters was the first big reaction.

And I would later understand that this was not the end but the signal of the beginning.

A few days had passed since my brother’s and my first fan letters had arrived.

Each day, two or three more letters would come to me, and my brother would receive about ten.

As it turned out, Neal was more popular than me.

Whether it was because of the contents of the letters or suddenly receiving so many letters from complete strangers, my brother was clearly troubled by them

all. When I asked Lynette about what was written in them, she told me that apparently, he had a lot of love letters from both boys and girls alike.

Neal was still young, but it was already very clear that he had inherited our mother's good looks. I had thought he would be making girls cry in the future, but he may even go beyond that—he would be making both girls *and* boys cry.

*No wonder he looks so lost.*

As someone who had already lived life once, I was able to simply throw the strange letters out after a quick skim. But for an impressionable child who still wasn't even ten, having unfamiliar adults sending letters like that his way must have felt terrible.

I wonder...if I had asked him, "How do you feel knowing that you're more popular with boys than your little sister?" would that have given him a wound he would never recover from for the rest of his life? Not that I was so cruel to actually try that, though.

Anyway.

Because of the more questionable contents of some of the letters, our parents made the—very appropriate—decision to check the letters before we got to see them.

Not long after this new rule was implemented, *he* came back.

"Young Mistress, the master and mistress are asking for you."

Jayes suddenly appeared with a summons just as I returned to my room after eating dinner with my brother.

"You were called down too, Nia?"

While on our way down, we bumped into Neal and Lynette and were then let into the reception room.

And there...

"Good evening, Neal, Nia."

Lynokis let out a small gasp. As a fan of magivision, she was shocked to see

one of her biggest idols had quite literally returned to our home. She'd even gotten his autograph the first time we met in person.

Yes, that man had come back.

The one waiting in the reception room with my parents was the host of *Tales of a Liston Stroll*, the man with the distinctive face, Bendelio.

"We have something important to talk about with the two of you. Please have a seat." Before we could even say our greetings, my father, still in his work attire, sat Neal and me down.

There was a low table placed in the center of the room, with our parents on the right and Bendelio on the left. Neal and I had been placed right in the middle.

"Welcome home, father, mother. Welcome, Mr. Bendelio."

Oh, Neal with his well-timed greeting. He was very well-mannered for his age. One would expect nothing less from the eldest son of a class-four aristocrat family. At least that meant their parents' teachings had been effective.

"Welcome home. Nice to see you," I also greeted them.

Our father nodded and then immediately cut straight to the matter at hand: "Bendelio has something he wishes to say. Please listen to his proposal."

*I'd bet.*

It was natural to see our parents at the Liston estate, but not Bendelio. Given both of us had been called under these circumstances, it wasn't hard to deduce that the one who wished to speak with us was our guest.

Honestly, I felt like I could guess where this was going already.

When the two of us looked over at Bendelio, he smiled with that particular and familiar face. "The reactions to the announcement broadcast were very positive. If you would feel up to it, would the both of you care to appear on magivision again?"

And there it was.

"Excuse me, but before we give our response, I wish to ask some questions,"

Neal calmly stated. "First, allow me to confirm something. The reason you wish for Nia and me to appear on magivision is to increase sales for the MagiPads... In other words, you wish for us to be an advertisement for them, yes?"

Neal's questions continued.

Were we to be part of a project to meet and entertain dignitaries? Were we to send messages of support to the adventurers investigating the floating islands?

Apparently, there were shows like those amongst the ones I wasn't allowed to see.

"Marketing is the purpose for asking this of you, yes," Bendelio answered. "Magivision and the MagiPads are still not that widespread of a culture. At the moment, only a handful of aristocrats and rich families have started trying them out. That means that right now, advertising them is a priority in order to have their usage spread."

Lynokis had informed me of that, as well. Magivision didn't have a very long history. Both MagiPads and knowledge of magivision had been spread through the Liston territories already, but that was because we had our own broadcasting station and channel. Ah, that was probably why it had spread through the royal capital, as well.

However, presently there were other territories that weren't even *aware* of magivision. The cause of that was purely the price of implementing it. Just a small MagiPad would cost a commoner several years' worth of living costs.

What was more, if there was no magic tower nearby to receive the signals from the broadcasting station, the programs wouldn't even show on the MagiPad in the first place. And then there was the fact that MagiPads needed manastones to activate.

Too many things were insufficient for magivision culture to truly spread right now.

*I'd like to hear more specifics concerning it, but let's leave it for now. Neal seems to know more about it than I expected, so I'll ask him later.*

"In that case," Neal said when Bendelio finished his explanation, "you should

be using Nia.”

Huh? Me?

“She is the daughter of the lord of this territory who recovered from her illness thanks to the influence of magivision. Nia is the literal personification of the possibilities of magivision. On top of that, children don’t really star in magivision programs. The audience’s interest in her appears to be partly due to that rarity. Right now, Nia would be the perfect poster child for magivision. Well...these are just the thoughts of a child, so I imagine you all have thought this, as well.”

Well, well... Neal was a child, but his intelligence was certainly well beyond his years. The words of those who stood to break many hearts definitely held a different weight.

“Recording a magivision show isn’t free, after all, and I have to return to Altoire soon. I don’t believe I’ll have the time to dedicate to this once I return to the dorms. More than that...” Neal turned to look at me. “Nia has nothing else to do right now other than work on gaining her strength back. Don’t you think it would be easier to work out a schedule with her than with me? Personally, it would be far more convenient.”

*So he says. In other words, he’s telling me to appear on magivision.*

“Yes... Logistically, you are correct,” father said with an awkward smile. My brother’s suggestion may have been exactly what the adults were planning to persuade us of.

“What do you think, Nia? Would you like to appear on magivision again?”

Of course, I had already decided my answer.

“No, I wouldn’t. But...”

That was true, I didn’t, but there was a reason for me to agree anyway.

“Mother, father, if you both wish me to, then I shall. I can’t even begin to imagine just how much love, worry, and money you expended for my sake. I may still be a child, but even I want to repay my parents’ kindness.”

Some say that a great debt can never be repaid. But I believed differently. I

had received Nia's body and was now living her life. How could I make no attempt to repay such a debt?

My parents looked at each other with somewhat troubled faces.

"We want to hear what *you* want. That should have nothing to do with our thoughts."

I immediately responded to my mother's words. "I wish to do all I can to abide by your wishes and help you with all my power. *That* is what I want. Is it wrong for the daughter of the Liston family to feel such a way?"

And so the decision for me to appear on magivision for a second time was finalized.

This magivision thing very much did not go in the direction I had expected it to, but it would at least broaden my range of travel.

The words I said to my parents were not a lie. If they wished for magivision to spread through the land, then as a repayment to them, I would more than happily lend them a hand.

*My body is still exhausted, but I do want to feel the rush of a real battle soon. If I keep lying around like this, my instincts for battle will only dull.*

I could only hope there would be a bloody affair somewhere, like getting to hunt a monster or wild animal... But maybe I was asking for too much.

Everything progressed quickly after it was decided I would appear on magivision again. But putting that aside for the moment, before things really started getting busy, I wanted to learn a bit more about magivision and MagiPads.

My role as a magivision star was somewhat vague. I still hadn't fully understood it. Just what was I meant to do as an advertisement for a product? Was I meant to display some childlike flirtatiousness? Should I take over the world with martial arts? Should I make those in power bend to my will through sheer strength? Now *that* I would like to do. A lot.

*The fact I can think such violent thoughts while retaining a calm mind is*

*probably the sign that I wasn't capable of anything but battle in my past life.*  
Even so, that wouldn't justify abandoning doing what I needed to do as Nia.

But that brought me back to my question: What *was* I meant to do?

With those questions in mind, I asked Neal about it the next day. I'd noticed that he was surprisingly knowledgeable about the inner workings of the Liston territories. He seemed especially knowledgeable about the magivision industry that our parents were pouring their blood, sweat, and tears into.

But upon my question, Neal frowned.

"Well...mother and father don't seem as if they want you to be too involved with the affairs of the house, so..."

"Really? After all of this? You so passionately put me forward just yesterday. Why are you being hesitant now?"

He *was* the one who had so shamelessly pushed me into this role after pretty much saying now was the time to use me, that I was at an age where I would be perfect for it, and that he wanted to use me as a shield because he was scared of his own fans.

"Let me be clear: I'm not that knowledgeable on all this either."

"Oh my. Is that so?"

"Yeah. I didn't hear any of this from mother or father. I looked into it all myself. And, well, even that..."

I'd had an inkling before, but it turned out that the Liston family had bought an incredible number of shares in the magivision industry. By my brother's speculations, we had purchased enough that our family was struggling financially.

"Nia, they originally got into this industry for your sake. Apparently, they thought you might one day get really ill, and so they got into the industry as soon as possible so they would have a way to ask for help across the nation if they needed to. But while that may be true, I personally think they had also seen the massive profits they could earn."

But of course. The cost of even a small MagiPad would be enough to allow a



commoner to live in comfort for years. Though the Liston family may be aristocrats, they couldn't just endlessly print money. They couldn't nearly bankrupt themselves all for the sake of their ill daughter.

The assets of the Liston family were supposed to go to the development and upkeep of its territories. There was a possibility that they had used their citizens' precious taxpayer money—something they should never have touched—to invest in the magivision industry. In other words, the debt I had to repay would not be so easily returned.

"How are our finances now?"

"I'm not sure. The shares have been sold to merchants on various floating islands within our territory, so I don't think we're in debt to them. Our grandfather may be a different story, though... But, I don't imagine we're in a situation where our family will collapse within the next year or so. Though this is all speculation."

In other words...

"You could also say that if magivision does not see profits within the next few years, the Liston family will be in trouble."

"That...isn't something for you to concern yourself with, Nia." Neal sounded very dependable as he said that, but his eyes turned downwards, and the fork he was poking at his salad with began shaking. "I-I have...a lot of rich fans, so...if I marry one of them then...then money won't be a problem. Thankfully, I'm not engaged to anyone, so if I paid the debt with myself, then—"

"Stop that."

I spoke without thinking.

I didn't want to hear those words to the end.

I felt like I understood just what had been troubling my brother about those letters now. Being too smart for one's own good was in itself a burden. A child should not have to think about essentially selling their own body. People could find themselves in very desperate situations, so I had no intention of judging those who did, but it wasn't something one could be proud of either.

“You’re the successor to the Liston family, no? In that case, I should be the one to make ends meet, should it come down to it—”

I would become an adventurer, travel to unknown floating islands, and hunt every last monster of value. There would be no need for me to hold back under those circumstances. *Hm. Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad, actually.*

But just as I was thinking to myself how favorable a life like that sounded, my brother frantically scolded me. “Absolutely not! What kind of older brother would I be if I couldn’t even protect my own sister?!”

I was stunned to silence for a moment, but then I looked up at him. “You’re so precious, brother.”

Lynokis had been restless ever since we started discussing the magivision situation. Jayes had looked away when the topic of the Liston family’s assets came up. Lynette had disturbingly murmured, “If only we had the money...” letting off a disquieting aura when Neal had spoken about using himself to acquire money, such an unchildlike thought.

Seeing his manliness and maturity now, all three of them were smiling.

Incidentally, I was also smiling. I had no intention of mocking his determination or his declaration, but what an adorable boy he was. Had something like this aired on magivision, I had no doubt that his fans would have increased tenfold.

If only we could.

“You sometimes speak really arrogantly, don’t you?” Neal said, raising an eyebrow.

Well, what did he expect? Combine my body’s age with my previous life and I had lived at least over double the number of years that he had.

*In any case, I better find a way out of this for my adorable older brother’s sake.*

The same night we had that discussion, Bendelio came to our house for the second night in a row with his good old distinctive face.

“The staff has been discussing just what kind of appearance we would like Nia to make on magivision.”

My parents, my brother, Bendelio, and myself were all seated back in the sitting room with a whole pile of documents placed in front of me.

“We refer to these as specials. Despite how many we’ve come up with, we still haven’t really reached a decision. I thought it would be best to hear the wishes of the star herself, so I brought them with me. Is there anything here you like the sound of?”

So *now* I was allowed to choose, was I?

I took various papers in hand and skimmed through them, sometimes asking my brother, who sat beside me again, to assist me with reading them.

Magivize me working up a sweat doing farmwork with the common folk. Magivize me teaming up with a famous adventurer for the day, serving as an advertisement for both adventuring and for magivision. Magivize me assisting with the cleanup of the warehouse of a large shop left untouched for years, showing off various curios and antiques. Magivize me visiting the homes of the arrogant rich and befriending them with the intention of receiving a charitable donation.

And so on and so forth.

Well...

Naturally, since I never really wanted to appear on magivision to begin with, none of them especially spoke to me, so I couldn’t tell which was the right choice.

That being the case, there was only one thing for it.

“Let’s do them all. Every single idea you thought up,” I said, returning the documents to the table.

Knowing in general how much of their finances the Listons had spent, the amount of money I would receive from only one or two appearances would be just a drop in the bucket. In fact, I was still barely sure how this would even make money. All the difficult stuff was for my parents and brother to think

about, anyway.

What I could do right now was appear on magivision and help integrate the technology into the culture.

After working out all the finer details, it was finally decided what my reappearance on magivision would consist of: it would be a program with multiple episodes called *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation*.

Each episode would consist of me going to different workplaces and introducing their jobs while also getting a chance to be hands-on myself. There were a lot of prospective specials suggested, but a lot of them were thematically similar—have me try out some kind of work.

In that case, why not have me be an apprentice for pros in those industries for half a day to let me get a taste of their work and have the crew record me doing that? With that format, we'd be fulfilling the idea of me doing various activities, and if possible, we'd be able to carry out all kinds of episodes with all kinds of occupations.

Generally speaking, there were still very few shows for magivision right now. If you watched magivision all day, you would start noticing that there were programs rebroadcasted multiple times. I imagine that was why the span of time between planning the episodes and the actual recording was pretty short.

"Your hand, Young Mistress."

"Thank you."

We were picked up by a small modern airship with a dull sheen to it. Just as I went to step up the ramp myself, Bendelio came down to greet us and escorted me on board.

*So this is the latest model of airship...*

Honestly, I still couldn't believe that such a huge hunk of metal was able to fly through the sky, but as much as I didn't want to ride it myself, there was no point in me complaining, so I chose to deal with it.

Various decisions had been made one after the other, and now it was time for my first recording session. Only a few days had actually passed since my next appearance on magivision had been finalized.

Neal was yet to return to Altoire, so he decided to tag along with me. He'd suddenly said he wanted to accompany me since it was my first real shoot. He was worried about me because our parents wouldn't be present due to other work obligations. Oh, how adorable.

Lynette and Lynokis carried my wheelchair into the airship, and once we were all boarded, the ship immediately began gaining altitude.

Jayes and the servants and gardeners that had come to see us off continued waving at us even as they disappeared from view.

*The floating islands:* They were levitating shards of the land that were said to have once been one big landmass with roots deep in the sea. The story went that the Earthsplitter Vikeranda, an elite monster at the level of a Divine Beast, had cracked the ground open, broken the continent apart, and sent those pieces of the earth flying into the air, creating the phenomenon of the floating islands.

The land connected by the sea still remained to some degree, but over half had been broken off.

Those events apparently happened several hundred years ago.

There was no doubt that the land suffered severe and extensive damage at the time of the incident, and yet the plants and animals that had been living on those pieces of land evolved in their own unique way, due to the rapid environmental change. And so began the survival of the fittest.

Those that were strong only became stronger. If they didn't, they went extinct, and a new species was born in their place. It was for that reason that there existed as many species of animals as there were floating islands, and they were scattered all over the place.

And that diversity wasn't just limited to the living creatures.

Although there was still no concrete explanation for their existence, there were many labyrinths on these islands, referred to as dungeons. Their presence

was assumed to be another result of the change in environment.

Around one hundred years ago, the first airships were developed, which secured a means of travel from one floating island to another. This led to the beginning of the search for and exploration of the uncharted grounds.

The governance of the Kingdom of Altoire's large floating islands and the small ones surrounding them had been left to other aristocratic families like the Listons. There were definitely resources to be found through investigation and excavation, so each territory funded their own explorations of the islands.

This was the first time I had the chance to look down on the floating island that held the Liston estate from above.

There was another large island packed with buildings off in the distance. That was the mainland of the Liston territory, and it was their largest island. The broadcasting station was built there, and it was where my parents headed to work every morning.

I could see other islands floating off in the distance, but they were too far away to see much detail.

My grandfather on my father's side—who had passed on rights to the Liston territory notably early—apparently lived on one of those islands. *I wonder which one it is?*

When I asked my brother about it, he pointed it out for me. "Grandfather lives on that island over there. He's been worried about you this whole time. You should find the time to pay him a visit."

So it was over there, was it? Somewhat related, Altoire Academy, where my brother usually stayed, was in the royal capital itself.

The floating islands were fascinating, but the ocean stretching out below us was just as incredible. Apparently, it had also been affected by the sudden geographical displacements, and a whole range of dangerous wild creatures had increased in population. The shallower waters near land were safe enough to go fishing in, but a lot of large monsters had made their homes farther out. Even now, it was still too dangerous to adventure through those areas.

The Royal Capital of Altoire wasn't a floating island but a large piece of land

still attached to the sea. The Liston territory seemed massive, yet there was somehow a land even bigger than that.

Bendelio called out to us while we were still watching the scenery on the deck of the ship. “Nia, mind if we have a little talk about your recording process?”

Airships had been enhanced with manastones to have a resistance to wind, so passengers didn’t feel much more than a breeze. The wind at high altitudes would ordinarily be strong, but thanks to the enhancement, you wouldn’t be swept away by strong winds or be unable to hear each other speaking even while out on the deck. And of course, there was barely any turbulence. The same enhancements had apparently been made to the island that the Liston family’s mansion was on, as well.

That aside, since we could hear each other perfectly fine, Bendelio could easily converse with us on the deck.

“You’re a much smarter girl than we expected, and you look as if you’d prefer to be kept in the loop, so I want to go into a little more detail. Were you a regular child, I’d likely avoid this, but I personally believe you’ll be able to handle it.”

Now where was this going, hm?

Neal’s gaze grew harsh. “Bendelio, sir, have you received permission from our parents to bring this up?”

Cute. The sight of a brother trying to protect his little sister was admirable. I really am not intending to patronize him, but he *is* endearing.

“I haven’t, no. But Nia understanding our goals will make it much easier for her to understand how to approach her performance. She isn’t some puppet that just does whatever she’s told, is she? She holds her own opinions and she’s able to voice them. She’s not as weak as her appearance might make someone think. I doubt she’d ever feel so intimidated by the adults that she couldn’t say what she means.”

Bendelio wasn’t wrong, and it only made me more interested in what he wanted to say. “Brother, let us at least give him a chance.”

Besides, my magivision show wasn’t something I had signed on to just

because *Bendelio* asked. Break it down, and it was a case of a member of the Liston household doing whatever she could for her family.

Honestly, the fact he was polite even to children and was able to discern when children should be informed of things they may not be privy to normally made him trustworthy as an ally in my eyes... Distinctive face aside.

My brother's look of disapproval was clear as day when he went silent, but I nodded at Bendelio to continue regardless.

"First, we need numbers. And by that, I mean the number of programs we have available to broadcast in a day. I want it scheduled that we only have a rebroadcast of this program once every other day, so things may be a little hectic for a while."

Ah, because right at the moment, there was pretty much nothing *but* rebroadcasts. It certainly was the case that the number of programs they had available to broadcast was still low.

"Don't hesitate to tell us if you start feeling ill. Fatigue shows on one's face, after all. We can't broadcast you looking like that."

So he was essentially telling me not to try too hard. *I must be careful.*

"Next, we need your reputation. Personally, we need someone who can be seen as the representative of the Liston territories, the *face* of these lands. That person needs to be popular enough to achieve that. Someone popular in a way that makes people think they *absolutely* have to watch the shows that they're on."

"Like you?"

"That's a little different. I was always originally just a director of the production crew, and I've not stepped down from that role yet. That's why I'm here now. I only made my debut as a host because there was no one else suitable... Oh, by the way, when you're a little older, Neal, how would you feel about taking over my role on *Tales of a Liston Stroll*?"

"I-I'll... I'll give it some thought." With his mind already weighed down by the thought of his fans, my brother very obviously had no interest in magivision. I couldn't blame him.



“Back to what I was saying, the only one who I could really say is a famous magivision star right now is the third princess of Altoire, Hildetaura.”

Wow, so there was someone like that already, was there?

“There are many programs I’m forbidden from seeing, so I haven’t ever seen this Princess Hildetaura before.”

“Wh— Are you serious?!”

With how surprised Bendelio was, this Hildetaura must have been really famous.

“Well, uh, you’ll...probably learn more about her with time, so let’s move past that for now. Oh, and about that innocent flirtatiousness you asked about, to try and pull in adults...”

Right, I had asked about that. When I did, he’d looked a little disturbed as he told me he’d think about it. My brother had looked a little disturbed himself, I think.

“Your charm is the calm you exude, your collectedness, your fearlessness. Rather than trying to force yourself to be a more energetic character than you are, I think you’re perfectly fine just acting the way you usually do.”

So I *didn’t* have to act flirty. I wouldn’t have to make sure to say, “I’d love to get married someday!” Perfect. I didn’t particularly want to.

“Okay, I understand. I will simply act natural. Though I would like you to tell me if there are ever any improvements I could make. I will do my best to become better.”

Bendelio nodded. “Of course. I won’t make this a program that will besmirch the Liston name.”

## Chapter 6: Nia Liston's Occupation Observation

"We're counting on you, Nia!"

Yes, yes. I stood up from my wheelchair and stepped in front of the camera.

"Three, two, one..." The director's fingers counted down, and the moment the last finger curled, the cameras started rolling.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Today on *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation*, I have come to visit the forge of a sword restorationist."

With this being the fifth shoot for my show, I was already more than used to it.

First had been the etiquette classroom of a woman who was a class-three aristocrat, then assisting a farmer with harvesting crops. After that, in order to save time and money, we did two different shoots that would break out into four cooking-themed episodes, one making regular meals, then one making sweets.

After recording, the footage was then edited, though that was a more specialized field that I didn't see or know very much about. From what I could gather, they would cut out the parts that they didn't want to show and stitch together the parts that they did, editing it to a suitable state for airing on magivision. That was also the part of the process where they added the music.

Just yesterday, my third cooking episode had aired. My brother had now returned to Altoire, my parents no longer worried for my health, and for this sword restoration episode, Bendelio and his distinctive face were not here. This was the first shoot where he hadn't been present, despite always sticking around before now.

It was clear that the people around me were no longer concerned about my illness.

Even I was pretty accustomed to the production environment, from Lynokis pulling no punches with her feedback whenever she looked over the footage to

the way the production changed members ever so slightly each time.

A month had passed since my first recording, and two weeks had passed since the first broadcast. Winter had yet to pass, but the gentle heat from the sun was slowly warming the islands.

Spring would soon arrive.

“And cut! Onto the next scene!”

And with this, the first shot for this episode was complete. We would now head for the forge of the sword restorationist we would be working with this time. To be more precise, we would move to somewhere nearby and film me walking up to the forge, all while I pretended this was my first time seeing it.

While the unfamiliar young director gave directions to the crew, I sat myself down on the wheelchair that Lynokis was pushing towards me. It was still impossible for me to be active for long periods of time. Though my disease may have healed, my body was still weak. I was especially lacking muscle.

I was somewhat able to force my body to keep moving during filming by manipulating my chi, but if I kept that up for too long, it would always leave me with immense fatigue the following day.

Regardless, I was making sure to eat and get plenty of rest. If I kept up that routine, I would be able to get rid of the wheelchair in a month or so.

“Young Mistress, the details on the forge.”

“Thank you.”

I left Lynokis to push me to our destination while I looked over the files about the sword restorationist.

Every episode, I couldn't help but think about how rude it would be to intrude on a worker's space without these files. If I didn't even know the bare minimum about them and their work, it would be much harder for conversation to flow.

Before meeting him, my impression of Bendelio was a man with a strange face who seemed to do nothing but drink alcohol, but now, I could tell that there was a tension between his careful preparation and the effortless performance that the viewers saw.

These shoots were exposing me to a number of new things, which made them real learning experiences, and they were quite exciting too. I doubted my old self had gotten the chance to try out so many jobs.

There was so much I didn't know, so much I had never done that it started making these recording sessions almost fun...I think.

"This here job's dangerous. Watch yourself."

The work space was smaller than I had anticipated, and within it, three craftsmen were busying themselves with their jobs.

At first when we'd walked in, the craftsmen all gathered to meet us, but the dour elderly man who seemed to be in charge only warned us with a hoarse voice to be careful and then said nothing else as he left to do his own work.

We were supposed to sit down together for an interview, but...more importantly.

*That man isn't half bad.*

The man in charge was both a craftsman and a swordsman. His posture, movements, and even aura were nothing like a regular person's.

If this man was truly a martial artist before a craftsman, then I'd have liked to spar with him... If I could get him to try, he would be quite skilled. I didn't think I'd be able to win without using both of my hands. I may not need my legs though.

Well, I would put that aside for now.

"Could you please tell us what kind of work you do?"

The unscheduled departure of the elderly man put a slight bump into the recording for a moment, but I chose to proceed as we'd discussed. The two men that appeared to be his apprentices looked a little worried, but they were willing to move the conversation forward upon my prompting.

"Thanks a bunch, Nia."

*Hm?*

After we'd finished filming that scene and he'd finished giving his instructions to the rest of the crew, the young director came over to me.

"Really, I should have been the one to move that forward, but..."

Ah, he was referring to the old man walking off.

"These kinds of unexpected developments happen all the time. Don't worry, you'll get used to it in no time," I said.

During the etiquette lessons, the aristocrat lady leading had been quite overzealous with her teaching and we had ended up running over time. The farmers wouldn't stop piling food onto us, and when we had the cooking lessons, the oil had splashed onto my face while we were chatting. Even though I had been more than willing to continue, Bendelio and Lynokis had frantically cut the shot to check on me.

The cookies had come out even better than I'd imagined, and I had been strangely moved by it, all while Lynokis kept begging me, "I want to eat the Young Mistress's cookies! I'll pay whatever I must!"

There was always at least one unexpected event every recording. This kind of thing just seemed to come with the territory.

The youngest and friendliest of the craftsmen saw me taking a break in my wheelchair, and his eyes went wide. "Wait, Nia, you use a..."

"Ah, no need to pay it any mind. I recently recovered from an illness, so I get tired a little easier right now."

"Oh, right, I did hear about that," he muttered.

I wasn't a fan of being worried over when it was unnecessary, so I changed the subject. "That aside, reforging swords looks like tough work." This was honestly something I had been curious about myself anyway.

I had the sense that in my past life, I had snapped swords in half and crumpled metal armor without a care. But if there were those who broke, there would be those who repaired.

I had the process of reforging a sword explained to me, along with how much time it took, and it sounded brutal. *Now that I know just how much work goes*

*into this, I'll refrain from going too crazy in the future.*

I think I used to break famous swords, sacred swords, cursed swords, you name it. And almost every day too, as if it were all just for fun... I broke them left, right, and center without restraint...

Maybe I could pretend I just made that all up...

A sword was the embodiment of a craftsman's skill and passion, a work created through shaving off a part of one's soul. My past self would have thought it wrong to destroy something like that for simple joy. Right?

*Surely I hadn't done anything like that.*

The way I so naturally thought about doing that kind of thing made it seem way more likely I had actually done that in the past... No. Nope. Mm-mm. Absolutely not. I may not have had my memories to say for sure, but I definitely had never done anything of the sort.

After a small break, we entered into the second half of recording.

"There are stages to restoring a sword."

The youngest craftsman returned to work, and then the second youngest... Well, there were only three craftsmen working there, so I guess I could call him the middle craftsman. He carried out the explanation and demonstration. Despite this likely being his first time on magivision, his speech and manner were both very calm.

We moved from the shop front—where a lot of items were placed—to the work space behind the counter. There were three worktables each set with tools and a sword in the process of being restored. There was also a forge for melting the metal nearby up the back. Even from afar, I could feel a slight heat from it. The youngest appeared to have completely forgotten about the cameras and was completely focused on some detailed work.

"He's currently mending some small surface scratches," the craftsman said, pointing at the table with the youngest. "The boss is in back repairing swords that can't be mended by just filing them down or coating them." This time he pointed farther inside. I could see the elderly man from before with his back

turned to us. The middle craftsman continued, “We repair more than just swords and armor, though. We also deal with accessories and ornaments. We fix leather goods too, but there hasn’t been much demand for it.”

Wow, even leather.

“Perhaps people aren’t aware that you’re taking orders for them.”

“Ah, maybe so. That would certainly explain it.”

They did have a very strong reputation for primarily working with metal, after all, and a sign that specifically said they restore swords.

“We’d like you to work with this today,” the middle craftsman said, guiding me to one of the workspaces.

Since this was a program in which I experienced other people’s jobs, I would get the opportunity to actually repair a sword myself.

“Oh my. A shortsword.” The voice that came out when I took the heavy sword sheathed within its metal scabbard was a little higher than usual.

I was so certain that since I was a child, they would have me restore something that would be okay for a child to potentially ruin, a junk sword, something worthless. I had been so certain that they were going to underestimate me because of my age and give me something completely pointless to do. And yet, they were presenting me with a real weapon.

This was completely unexpected.

Even if this was a boring, low-quality shortsword, this was the first weapon I’d touched in a long time. My heart was frantically racing!

“A sword... Can I really manage this?”

“Oh, no, I’ll be asking you to do the scabbard. I’ll be the one doing the sword,” the middle craftsman quickly corrected.

*Oh, what? So I won’t be the one with the sword, after all.* I had been so excited at the chance to touch a real sword too. What a waste of my happiness!

Well, there was nothing I could do. This *was* what I had expected. No sensible adult would allow a five-year-old child to handle a knife, let alone a weapon.

They didn't even let me hold a knife during the cooking lesson. I *knew* this.

"Then I'll leave the fun job to you. I would be very happy to repair the bori—the very important scabbard which holds the sword." It was really not a good idea for me to insult the scabbard. Even if it was what I really felt.

But even though I thought I had covered it up well, the young director had his arms crossed in an X from behind the camera. Guess it wasn't good enough.

*Yes, okay, I'll redo it.*

The process of restoring the scabbard was more fun than I had expected.

As I took the battered and bruised sheath and polished it and filled the grooves with clay, it slowly returned to its original form.

It was somewhat ironic that someone who used to do nothing but destroy was now here doing the mending...

*Wait, no, I have no definitive memories, so I still can't really say if I had a habit of breaking people's gear. And the little girl Nia Liston most certainly hasn't. That act is still unattempted in this life. Oh no, I said "still." You know what, let's move on.* My mind was starting to get restless, so I decided I may as well just stop thinking.

"I've mostly finished now. What do you think?"

I sat side by side with the middle craftsman in front of a large table. We'd been working away while being recorded the whole time. The whole process was quite peaceful, with us sometimes talking to each other as we worked.

Most of it would likely be cut in editing, but there was plenty of footage that could be used, I was sure.

I hadn't been told how to handle the really minute scratches, so my work was done. I told the craftsman that I had finished with the scabbard.

"Wow, this is pretty good..." the craftsman muttered without thinking as he looked over the scabbard in detail.

I had no idea what was good or bad, so I would just take it as him being polite.



“My hands are very skilled. How about your enjoyable sword restoration?”

“Ah, yes, take a look.”

Wow...

When I’d first seen the sword, it appeared quite dull. But its age showed in a way that you could tell its wielder had used it with care for many years. If I put it a bit more bluntly, though, it was just old. I had been concentrating on the scabbard, so I hadn’t been watching the craftsman, but his hands had turned the old, plain shortsword into quite the sight.

Working on the sheath hadn’t been as boring as I had initially thought, but I still thought that sword would have been more enjoyable to work on.

The second half of recording proceeded without incident, until we finally reached the grand finale.

“All right, fine.”

We would round off this session with a test of the sword that the elderly man had been restoring in the background.

Round the side of the forge was an area that they likely used for testing, with rows of pillars that had been lined up and hammered into the ground. One of the younger craftsmen placed a battered wooden shield up against one of the pillars. With the scene set, the old man faced the pillar and made a downward strike with the longsword.

The blade wedged itself cleanly into the middle of the shield.

*Not bad.*

“Cut! Thank you very much!” And that marked the end of the recording of the forge.

*All that’s left is for me to say my farewells to the craftsmen, I think?* If there was nothing else, that would be the end of that.

I went to speak to the elderly craftsman while the film crew was wrapping up. “Is that sword not intended for real battles?”

“Huh?”

The nature of filming an actual sword being swung had already caused some tension, but my question had made a completely new tension float in the air.

The only ones paying attention here were myself, the elderly craftsman, Lynokis, and the younger apprentices who were watching us. The production crew was too busy packing up to watch or listen.

“You’re good enough that you should’ve been able to slice that shield in two even with a dull blade, no?” Swords were not my forte, and even I was capable of that much. So this man who was more skilled than me should have most certainly been capable of it.

“Hmph. What’s a kid like you know?”

“Nothing, that’s why I’m asking,” I said as I sat myself down on the wheelchair that Lynokis had wheeled over. “I apologize. That was rude of me.” There was a difference between not cutting and not *being able* to cut. I wasn’t entirely sure which it was so I decided not to pursue that line of conversation, instead...

“But...even I could cut that shield in half. You just didn’t let me do it.”

“Excuse me?”

*Hey, he got mad. All according to plan!*

Could you blame me? I was in a forge filled with weapons, and yet I wasn’t being allowed to swing a single one. I just couldn’t hold it in. Admittedly, I wasn’t the biggest fan of weapons, but I would use anything if it meant I could just get the smallest taste of a real fight again. Truly, I would use *anything*.

“Then how about you show me how it’s done, hm? If you can, then I’ll show you. My swords aren’t little toys.”

*So you just didn’t want to show off, huh?*

“Young Mistress, you can’t,” Lynokis quietly begged by my ear. But I ignored her and stood up.

“Allow me to borrow your blade.”

When I held my hand out, the old man looked at me like he couldn’t believe I was really going through with this, but he still passed the longsword over to me.

Yep, it was heavy. But it was a good kind of heavy. It was completely different than a wooden sword. It may actually have been a bit too heavy for this body, but...since I only had to make one swing against a still target, I figured it shouldn't be an issue.

*Let's get this out of the way while the crew isn't watching.*

*Raise it up high—and then swing it down.* A whoosh ripped through the air, and the blade stopped just short of the ground. A part of the left side of the wooden shield had been cut clean off.

“As I thought, this isn't for a real battle. It doesn't seem like a very good-quality sword.”

The center of gravity felt off and there had been some drag as I swung the blade down. It may not have been obvious to a casual observer, but the blade hadn't been sharpened properly. Maybe this had never been intended for actual use but just as an antique. Or maybe it was some important memento.

When I held the blade out to them, the three craftsmen were staring at me in shock.

“Nia, we're heading to our next spot now! Thank you for agreeing to be recorded today, everyone!”

The director was calling for us. I suppose that was all for now.

“Thank you for today.” I made sure to say my own farewells and left the forge in my wheelchair. And with that, my fifth occupation observation was complete.

*Ahhh, that was fun! It might not have been for very long, but I finally got to imagine I was in a real fight again! It feels so good! The sensations I had forgotten are coming back to me!*

I needed to hurry up and train my body and finally have a real fight with someone.

Apparently, my popularity was only increasing.

My winter of nonstop recording had ended, and spring had begun. Neal would be returning home soon for the spring break, but the day before that...

“Nia, you’ve really gotten quite popular. Thanks to you, sales of the MagiPads are increasing every day,” my father praised me as we were sitting eating breakfast.

The amount of fan letters I received each day hadn’t particularly changed in number; I was still receiving only two or three at a time, and some days getting none. Likewise, my brother was also still receiving fan letters with the same frequency as he was before.

Honestly, I didn’t think Neal should be given his fan letters, even if the more extreme or disturbing ones were removed. I wasn’t in a position to say anything on the matter, though.

Him aside, there were no real changes around me, so I hadn’t thought there was much of an impact, but apparently there had been a positive to me appearing on magivision, after all. All I was able to do was keep making appearances on *Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation*, so I hadn’t actually been aware of the reception.

Thinking it through, though, it couldn’t be cheap to keep making episodes of a show. The fact the recording sessions were still continuing at all was a reflection of how well the show was doing. There was an actual reason to continue despite the costs.

*I see, so it was actually well received.* Maybe it hadn’t been my imagination that my parents had been in much happier moods recently.

Seeming to be in a good mood today as well, my parents started saying they wanted to buy me something as a reward.

I only wanted one thing right now: someone strong who would not crumble. Someone who was so sturdy that they wouldn’t break even if I punched them at full strength...

Of course, I couldn’t say that, so I just said, “I’ll leave it to you.” Ah, I would happily take an unexplored island, though. There would be wild animals and monsters roaming all over it. Naturally, though, they’d never give me something like that either. In times of financial hardship, sharing your property with your child would be difficult.

Anyway, back to magivision. According to calculations, about three percent of the citizens of the Liston territory now owned MagiPads; that was how remarkably well they were selling. It was still too expensive for the common man to buy one, but they were now being sold to smaller companies and territory-lord-run facilities like theaters or information centers in addition to the large companies that had been using them before.

This was partly a result of prospective customers inquiring about if they could take out a loan for the MagiPads and the company agreeing. I wasn't told the specifics, but apparently, they'd implemented a system of payments done over installments. The company or shop in question would have inspections done concerning their profits and how long they had been in business for, and if they passed that screening process, they were given permission to purchase a MagiPad with the installment system.

And as for why this was happening in the first place, well, that was because of my *Occupation Observation*.

As we saw with Bendelio's show, the shops introduced on magivision would end up with a massive influx in sales and inquiries after the episode featuring them aired. In other words, we had shown that magivision could have a positive effect on publicity.

There were inevitably calls from businesses that wanted us to show off their shop or let me have work experience there, which in turn added to their profits. Though the ways to make money from magivision were still being explored, there was clear progress being made.

If things continued to go this well, the Liston family's finances would be back to normal in no time.

Neal said that our assets would be fine for another year or two, but...was this rate really enough to make it in time? That was my main worry right now.

"Thank you for the meal. I will excuse myself early." I finished my breakfast and stood up.

"Ah, Nia. Hold on a moment."

The entire meal, my parents had been arguing about how to reward me, somehow also flirting with each other at the same time, but my mother called out to me as I went to leave.

“Would I not be getting in your way?” This had originally been about me before they started getting all lovey-dovey with each other. I would only be third wheeling if I stuck around, no?

“You’re never in the way, darling,” my mother said, smiling at me.

I didn’t really appreciate those kinds of lies. If a couple who was getting along very well in their bedroom in the middle of the night were suddenly interrupted by their child, that would be a problem, wouldn’t it? What if a regular child believed such words? I wasn’t a normal child, so it wasn’t such an issue with me, but if it were my brother, that would be a *very* different story.

“A different work request for you came in.”

Something new, hm?

“You mean outside of *Occupation Observation*?”

“Mm-hmm. And unrelated to us, as well.”

Well, this was a first. The broadcasting station belonged to the Liston territories, or more specifically, my parents. Whenever I took jobs as part of the Liston broadcasting initiative, it was more akin to a public service or a family business.

I had been working according to the plans laid out by the company, but this was from an external client, a private commission from a civilian.

“Do you remember Mrs. Rhyme?”

Ah, yes, I did.

“She’s the one who carried out the etiquette lessons, yes?”

She was that passionate lady I had met for the first episode of *Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation*. She was actually a higher-ranked aristocrat than the Listons, being one of the third class.

“She would like you to act in a stage play, with her serving as the referrer.”

A...what now?

“Young Mistress, Young Mistress! This could be your debut as an actress!”  
Lynokis whispered in my ear upon seeing my confusion.

My actress...debut?

I...still didn't quite understand what they were prattling on about.

“Wow, the Ice Rose Theater Company is quite famous even within the royal capital.”

Altoire had entered its spring break, and Neal had returned home. He was currently flipping through the thin script I had received as part of the acting work that I had accepted a few days earlier.

“Apparently so.”

There were still shows I was banned from watching—or perhaps that had just been forgotten. Although I had become a part of the magivision scene, the programs I was allowed to watch were still restricted, just as it had been while I was sickly and confined to my bed.

From what I was told, theatrical productions were another type of program that aired on magivision, and they were especially popular with the female demographic.

Of course, there was no way that our local magivision fanatic, Lynokis, wouldn't be keeping up with this. I had made sure to ask her all about it in preparation.

My appearance onstage would be as an actress for the Ice Rose Company.

The troupe was founded by a beautiful blue-haired man, Julian, who was the current artistic director of the company. He had split off from the most popular theater company in the capital and become independent.

Naturally, Julian was also a famous actor, but so was his twin sister.

The namesake of the Ice Rose was the title of a famous stage actress from the last era of theater.

“They’re a much newer theater company, but they’re so talented that I would honestly call them a key figure in the industry already. Ahh, to think the day would come when I would get to see the Twin Ice Princes in person! I could just cry!”

So said our resident magivision buff.

Incidentally, that whole “Twin Ice Princes” thing was apparently the title given to Julian and his sister. There were so many titles in this industry, they were hard to remember.

“Have you ever seen a performance by the Ice Rose Theater Company, brother?”

“Yeah. Well, not in person, but I have on magivision.”

Well now.

“Do you think I should give them a watch too?”

“I would say so. Having just a bit of knowledge goes a long way,” Neal said, nodding in affirmation.

“Lynokis. Tell me when magivision is showing a stage play. I don’t particularly care what it is.”

When I asked her to do that, she didn’t approve.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Young Mistress. You still haven’t been given permission...”

Oh, right. I hadn’t. I had just been thinking about that too.

Neal sighed. “Is there really any point in keeping this up? The performance that Nia will be a part of is *The Girl Who Fell in Love*, and Nia’s role is Sachute, a girl abandoned by her mother.”

Neal was absolutely correct.

It felt like these restrictions had been put into place because my parents didn’t want me to see the dirty and shocking reality of adult life, but we were way beyond that now. This production was quite literally going to immerse me in said dirty and shocking reality.



As Neal had mentioned, the play I was to perform in was the love story of a widow who was torn between following her duty or following her heart, trapped in that gap between being a mother or just a simple girl, having fallen in love with a man and being torn between the decision of her lover or her child.

It ended with the widow abandoning her child and running to be with her lover. Such a conclusion would be quite shocking from a child's point of view.

It was ever so slightly better that I was the one taking this role, but it still seemed like a strange thing to ask a child to participate in. Maybe if you were a child who was aiming to become an actor, this would be exactly the kind of role you'd want, but I wasn't interested in that path, so that didn't apply to me.

"By the way, Nia," Neal said, looking at me curiously.

"Yes?"

"I noticed you've been doing...something for a while now. Is that training for the play? Or is it dancing?"

What Neal was referring to was my practice of the forms found in martial arts. At least, I assumed that was the case. I was doing them without real intentional input. I had no memories of it, so I didn't know the specifics.

"Just some light exercise." I left my explanation at that.

Since winter had turned into spring and I had finally graduated from using my wheelchair, I was able to get some meat on my bones, increase my stamina, and complete my daily tasks without issue. That was what had led me to practicing my forms.

Technically, I could do it in the garden, but I had a bad feeling I would attract the eyes of the servants, so I decided to do it in my unnecessarily large bedroom.

Slowly.

Slowly, I moved my body while tempering my chi.

Refrain from using speed, recoil, acceleration, or force in your movements. Simply slowly allow your body to flow. Move your body with precision, and

remain still and silent once complete.

After doing it once, I was out of breath, and sweat was pouring off me.

After doing it twice, I was so exhausted I could barely stand.

I could move on to the next step once I was able to do this for a whole day, but it seemed like that would take a while, as well.

And while my brother hadn't caught on, Lynette and Lynokis were silently, yet intently, viewing my movements and seeing neither theater training nor dance, and naturally not light exercise either.

They were no doubt starting to see the strength inside me through my forms, as they watched me with serious expressions on their faces.

I immediately requested I be allowed to watch plays on magivision, and my parents agreed.

Tch...

Honestly, I really wanted to watch those shows that followed adventurers around the floating islands, but my parents were not so kind as to allow that.

Ugh, I just wanted to see blood again. I wanted to witness the gory scene of a battle. Well, whatever. The Liston family's finances were more important than my desires for now.

The moment the ban was lifted, I spent my free days watching all kinds of plays with my brother. Among those were plays put on by the Ice Rose Company, but there were also productions from other companies who performed *The Girl Who Fell in Love*, as well. It certainly helped to have a reference. So I would be performing in this kind of play, would I?

Hmmm.

I must say...

Every single one was so unnecessarily roundabout and convoluted. And sometimes they would just start singing and dancing out of nowhere. Were there no plays where everything was solved with a single strike from an iron fist?

It was because they spent all their time dragging it out that they caused problems for those around them and ultimately turned their relationship into a whole sludgy mess of love and hate. Just say it straight. What good was it for *adults* to not even be able to sort their own problems out? Those kinds of troubles should have already happened when you were an inexperienced, self-conscious child. Those were my thoughts, but clearly those around me did not agree.

“That was amazing.”

My brother was fascinated, and both of the attendants were so moved that they were crying. Was what we had just watched good? The play had followed the life of a man from his days as a child until he was sixty. He’d had a crush on a girl since his childhood, and that first love was finally reciprocated right before his death, but was it really good? That boy could have lived a different life if he had just said he loved her, or, depending on the situation, kissed her, or pushed her down. If he was too shy, he could have sent her a love letter or a bouquet of flowers. Was this really, truly *good*?

It must have been. They were crying, after all.

You know, I’d started to get the feeling that, um...perhaps my own emotions were the issue here. Or maybe I was just too tactlessly blunt?

Oh, and there was also one more thing I noticed.

No matter which theater company we saw, no matter which actress was onstage, none was as cute as my brother. When I asked Lynokis and Lynette about it while Neal was out of the room, they both agreed with me. No wonder he was still getting fan letters.

“He’s really improved,” Lynokis remarked.

“Yes. I’m excited to see how he’ll grow from here.”

Afternoons were spent watching my brother’s sword training.

“Nia, we’re counting on you!”

“Yes, I’ll do my best.”

Days were spent recording *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation*.

"Why am I still getting fan letters? I only appeared on magivision once..."

"You're so popular, dearest brother."

Breakfasts were spent admiring how cute my brother was and watching over him every time he despaired over the passionate fan letters that were still coming in.

Those days passed by in the blink of an eye, and before long, my brother's short spring vacation was coming to an end, and I had also finished packing. My wording may be misleading—I left the packing to Lynokis, really.

A small airship was on standby at the port on the edge of the island.

"Your airship is such a relief to see, brother."

I had ridden airships plenty by this point, but even now, I still could not believe that those lumps of metal could fly in the air. I simply couldn't get rid of my skepticism.

The exterior of my brother's was made of wood, and for some reason, that was enough to make me much more comfortable. Wood seemed like it could theoretically fly in a way that metal shouldn't.

"The inside is really cool. Wanna see the engine?"

"No, I'm fine." There was no need to show me anything metallic. In fact, I didn't want to see it at all.

"Be careful, you two. Lynette, Lynokis, do look after the young master and mistress."

Jayes saw us off, and the vintage airship took off from the Liston estate.

My work this time would take me to a theater in the Royal Capital of Altoire. You could get there in half a day by airship, but flying there and back every time for rehearsals would just be a waste of time, so we decided that I would stay in the capital for a while. The times didn't completely overlap, but Neal's school break ended around the same time, so I took the opportunity to piggyback on my brother's journey back to the dorms.

“Would you like me to show you around the capital once we arrive?”

“That would be lovely. I’ll ask you later once my own schedule is sorted out.”  
It wasn’t that I had no interest in the capital, but I wasn’t going there for a simple visit, so I would rather take a look around during my free time.

The first thing I needed to do when I arrived at the capital was to meet with Mrs. Rhyme, whom I hadn’t seen since she was featured on the first episode of *Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation*.

The only reason this opportunity came in was because she was good friends with my parents, and they gladly accepted it. And the job this time was actually coming from a third party, so she was just acting as an intermediary. In other words, the company was asking for me to be introduced to them.

Mrs. Rhyme had been aiding us plenty on the surface already, both by appearing on the Liston Broadcasting Channel and by introducing me to the client this time. And there were likely things behind the scenes that I wasn’t even aware of. I couldn’t thank her enough.

“More importantly, how has school been going for you, brother? Are you making sure to keep up your work? Are you eating well? Should you get into a fight with a friend through your own fault, you must apologize. Oh, and when you take your clothes off, don’t throw them any which way.”

“Are you my mother now or something?”

Oh right, our mother *had* been saying similar things to him. But, well, what did he expect us to say? A boy still so young going to live in a dorm away from home. What relative *wouldn’t* worry?

“I assure you that as the eldest son of the Liston family, I am living my life to the fullest in a manner that would not bring shame to our name.”

What a proper response.

“Glad to hear it. And? What about the rest?”

“The rest?”

“For example, you haven’t been making any girls cry by leading them on or anything, have you?”

“...”

Ah, this silence and the way he averted his gaze. He'd already done it.

“Well, it... It's fine. Lynette is strict with how I interact with people, anyway. At the very least, though I may be inexperienced, I'm not living a life of laziness.”

So Lynette had been guiding him. She was always by my brother's side, but we had little reason to interact, so I didn't know very much about her. We'd only spoken a handful of times. Actually, she was literally standing with us at that moment.

If she were a little stronger, I would be more interested, but... Well, it was a little much to ask for excessive strength from a personal attendant, I suppose.

Now that I think about it, Lynokis had said that she was classmates with Lynette at Altoire.

Perhaps that was something to think about later.

“You said that you would be recording for *Occupation Observation* in your spare time here as well, right?”

“Yes, apparently so.”

It was decided that I may as well do some shoots in the royal capital while I was here. It had been some time since he was at my shoots, but Bendelio and his distinct face had made their appearance at the Liston estate for the first time in a while just to make this suggestion.

Given its name, *Tales of a Liston Stroll* could only record within the Liston territories, so Bendelio never got to film episodes in the royal capital, or anywhere outside the territory, for that matter.

But in my case, the show was purely about trying out different occupations, so I had no such restrictions. That's why he had suddenly pushed for me to do more than just the work with the theater company.

The broadcasting station was probably in a frenzy right now, drawing up a proposal, finalizing schedules, and arranging appointments with the people I would be visiting. As nothing had been decided, even I didn't know what the

filming would be like. It was a little exciting.

“Would you like to make an appearance too, brother? Since we’re actually filming in the capital for once.”

“No way. I’m never appearing on magivision again.”

Oh my, so immediate. Neal was quite cute when he pouted too.

The relaxing flight through the skies ended exactly on time. Half a day had passed since we left the Liston estate in the morning, and the royal capital came into view by the evening.

The vast land rooted into the ground was dyed red in the evening sun. Its imposing appearance as not a floating island but a part of the land had a majesty and strength to it befitting the land of a king.

The airship safely arrived at port, and so we entered the Royal Capital of Altoire. This was a port specially for Altoire students and staff, so when we arrived, we were able to leave Neal’s airship to the port workers.

“Young Master Neal, the time is fast approaching,” Lynette said upon their disembarking.

“Yes, I know,” he responded, nodding. “I’m sorry, Nia, but I have to go.”

“Curfew, yes? Please don’t worry about me.”

I had heard many things on the way here, including that the dorms for those in the elementary school division of Altoire Academy had quite an early curfew, and if you didn’t return before then, you would be locked out.

The original schedule probably left them with some leeway, but with me asking to join them, all their plans would have been moved up enough that their arrival was just in the nick of time. Avoiding some of the large clouds along the way would have added to the time lost, as well.

If they were late for curfew, they wouldn’t be able to enter the dorm until morning, giving them no choice but to spend the night elsewhere. There was still time before the spring vacation ended, so it was no problem for students to stay off campus, but Neal appeared to want to go back to the dorms right away.

Given the current financial situation of the Listons, he probably wanted to avoid any unnecessary expenses.

“I’m sorry. I’ll see you later.”

With a short farewell, my brother and Lynette jogged off into the evening capital.

Now then.

“Shall we also be on our way?” I said to Lynokis.

“Yes, Young Mistress.”

And so, Lynokis and I also began slowly making our way down into the capital’s streets.



## Chapter 7: Work in the Capital

*The Royal Capital of Altoire.*

As expected from a city with such a name, it was a bustling place with a castle that housed the royal family. It was also the most important city of the Kingdom of Altoire—it was even outright *named* Altoire—and the city located on the only piece of land in the kingdom that was still rooted to the ocean.

Now that airships had been developed as a form of transport, the logistics of trade had changed drastically, turning the capital into a key hub. The people go where the goods gather, after all.

The main island of the Liston territories was quite prosperous itself, but it was nothing compared to the capital. This was very much the big city. Starting from the port facing the sea, the city stretched on in a rectangular shape. I had heard that even a whole day wasn't enough to walk from one end to the other. Seeing was believing, though, and I now very much believed.

The people were many, the streets were lively, and the goods were overflowing. I was so small that my point of view was greatly restricted as we made our way through; that was how many people there were walking to and fro. Honestly, it was quite annoying.

“Young Mistress, do make sure you don't end up separated from me.”

“Yes, I know.”

Being an Altoire alum herself, Lynokis had good knowledge of the capital's roads. We couldn't keep Mrs. Rhyme waiting for too long, so I left the navigation to Lynokis to avoid wasting time.

“You're welcome to hold my hand,” she said.

“But you're holding our luggage.”

“Ah, so I am. Then my sleeve?”

“No, I'm fine. Let us hurry along.”

I wasn't so young I would get lost in a crowd. Nia may have been five years old, but I was very likely much older.

"You know, ever since you've left your wheelchair, I feel as if we don't get much physical contact anymore."

Well, that was certainly random.

"I really do not care, so can we hurry up? Mrs. Rhyme will be waiting for us."

"Children grow so fast, don't they?" she sighed. "It makes me quite sad."

I had absolutely no idea what she was on about. What was going on? Had Lynokis's motherly instincts suddenly awakened or something?

Regardless, for now, we just needed to reach our destination. Someone was waiting for us, after all. I hurried Lynokis along while she pouted and complained about something or other, and we delved right into the crowds.

"This area is only so busy because it's the commercial district. The other areas won't be so crowded."

And she was correct. Once we passed all the stalls and shops of the commercial district, the number of people decreased quite dramatically.

"This is the main street. Look over there." Unable to point with her hands filled with luggage, Lynokis turned her gaze into the distance. When I followed where she was looking... Ah.

"I saw this place on *Beautiful Sceneries*."

*Beautiful Sceneries* was a program that aired on the capital's channel that, as the name suggested, showcased beautiful sceneries from around the world. It was one of the first programs I had been allowed to watch when I first was given my MagiPad.

And what I was looking at in that moment was one of those sceneries.

Lined up along the wide main street were a number of stylish high-class shop buildings, and even farther down the street was the beautiful castle. The image I saw on magivision was taken from a little farther back, I believed. That episode was rerun many, many times, so I had easily committed the sight to memory.

But there was a whole new kind of imposing aura to the whole thing seeing it in person rather than through a MagiPad screen. Most likely because it looked so much smaller on there.

With the large castle by our side as we walked, its profile painted red by the setting sun, we finally arrived at our destination, a restaurant named Chocolate Lily's Aroma.

"Welcome, Miss Liston. Allow me to guide you to your seat."

It was certainly a high-class restaurant from appearance alone.

I had told Lynokis to bring our luggage to our hotel first and to meet me inside later, but the moment I entered, a very refined middle-aged waiter came and greeted me by name. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, but this was certainly an establishment that chose its guests. They very likely refused entry to nobodies or first-time visitors without a referral. Though that was normal for this kind of restaurant, I suppose. Reservations were likely required.

"Thank you. Has Mrs. Rhyme arrived?" I asked.

"Yes, she is currently with her companion. Please follow me."

The waiter directed me to the general dining area... No, in fact, he was guiding me even farther inside.

"A private room?"

"Yes. In here, please, madam."

The waiter knocked and, upon receiving an answer, silently opened the door. I stretched my back a little straighter and walked into the room.

"It has been a while since we last met, Mrs. Rhyme."

The woman before me was a class-three aristocrat that currently worked as a home tutor of etiquette for children of the higher classes. She looked at me with a calm but searching gaze. "It's nice to see you again, Nia."

It was a woman in her midforties with tightly tied blonde hair and a tastefully tailored dress that wasn't overly flashy. Those deep green eyes were calm but measured.

*Helena Rhyme*: She was the wife of fellow class-three aristocrat Jaurès Rhyme, and many among even the royalty had been students of her teaching. She was a well-respected figure in Altoire society and also the first guest on *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation*.

I realized later that Mrs. Rhyme was likely chosen to be our first guest to provide prestige to the new program and make it known far and wide that the Liston family was acquainted with someone of her esteem.

Magivision was still a lesser-known culture, especially amongst the common people. On top of that, it hardly had any precedent, and many producers were figuring things out as they went along. No one yet knew what was correct, what was typical, what would be considered failure, or what would be considered taboo.

I heard that there were those amongst the aristocrats who were against children being so blatantly filmed for magivision, perhaps because it was rare for them to appear on programs in the first place. Mrs. Rhyme could serve as a foundation for pushing down those voices of opposition. At least, that's how I viewed it in hindsight. Criticize me for being a child starring on magivision and you would ultimately be criticizing Mrs. Rhyme, as well. It was almost a political tactic.

Regardless, this wasn't particularly something for me to think too hard about. Those were the kinds of adjustments my parents handled. I simply had to put all my effort into the recordings.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Liston."

After saying my hellos to Mrs. Rhyme, the man who had been sitting beside her stood up and introduced himself.

"Are you Mr. Julian, sir?" I asked the handsome man with blue hair. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I'm Nia Liston." Given he was meant to be the one I was getting the offer from, and also considering the work I would be doing, I had little doubt it was him.

"I am. My name is Julian Lordheart, the artistic director of the Ice Rose Theater Company."

Hmm, so this was his natural face, was it?

I had seen him on magivision before, but only when he was onstage, and it was through a screen, as well. Seeing him here now, he didn't have the flashy makeup that made him stand out, or the costuming to suit his role, so it felt as if I were seeing a completely different person.

It was true that onstage, he was flashy and glamorous enough to be called the face of the company or even a star of the field, but...

"You're handsome even without your makeup."

He was a man just crossing twenty with unique blue hair and deep hazel eyes. With his tall and slender frame, no wonder he stood out on the stage.

"Ha ha, thank you very much. You look very charming yourself, Miss Liston."

Right? But quite frankly, my brother was much cuter.

After finishing introductions, I sat myself at the table.

"Mrs. Rhyme, thank you very much for your time on my program. Were you able to see the broadcast?"

"I was. I've seen many of your shows, as a matter of fact." So she had been kind enough to watch me. "Well, it certainly wasn't unpleasant to watch. You are still inexperienced, but I can clearly see you doing your best to keep up the look of a lady."

Oh, she was evaluating my etiquette.

Go at it too seriously and I would end up intimidating the guests, but if I acted too much like a child, I would bring shame to the Liston family name. It was truly a difficult program to record.

I'd been taking it quite casually at first, but Mrs. Rhyme's teachings had more of an effect on me over time. Slack on my manners and I would hurt my family's standing; flaunt my ignorance and I would besmirch my family's name; relax too much and our family would receive negative attention. The advice Mrs. Rhyme had given me came to my mind every time I had to interact with another for my show.

"If I have your approval, then I am most relieved."

“Now don’t you start getting ahead of yourself, young lady. I did say you were still inexperienced, and there are certainly places I would dock points.”

As strict as ever, she was. But these were the kinds of people whose words you would end up returning to more and more over time. So much so that they would become a great asset to you later in life. I was sure it would be a difficult thing for a regular child to understand, though. Chances were that until they grew old enough and could look back and fully comprehend her intentions, Mrs. Rhyme came across as nothing more than an annoying old lady.

“Now, now, Mrs. Rhyme.” Julian presumably thought the air between us was getting a little tense, but it really wasn’t anything that serious. I was accepting of her criticism, and Mrs. Rhyme knew that. It was only natural for me, though. I wasn’t such a child I felt the need to retaliate at every piece of feedback.

The waiter who had shown me to the back room earlier asked if we were ready for the food now. Apparently, the courses were already decided for me.

“Excuse me.”

Lynokis also arrived at the same time and took her place behind me. As a personal attendant, she was not to sit at the table. When I told her she could go have dinner somewhere else first, she vehemently refused. She most likely wanted to be in a room with Julian, given her love of famous magivision stars. But, well, if she herself was okay with it, then there was nothing more for me to say.

Mrs. Rhyme and Julian partook in a bit of alcohol, while I was left with a glass of water. But...I wanted alcohol. I wanted white wine. Even red would be fine. Watching people drink in front of me made the cravings so much worse.

*If I keep focusing on the wine, I’m going to end up saying something I’ll regret, so let’s talk about my work.*

“Are the two of you acquainted?” I chose to ask.

This work apparently came in from an acquaintance of Mrs. Rhyme, so the natural assumption would be that said acquaintance was Julian.

“More than just acquaintances, we’re relatives. Julian is my nephew.”

They were related?

“I’m actually the son of her older sister,” Julian explained. “Because of the work I’m doing, I don’t particularly make my class known publicly. Only a few people know of my relationship with Mrs... I mean, with my aunt.”

Not that I could know what the situation with her sister was, but from the way Julian spoke, she must have been an aristocrat. The Lordheart name he introduced himself with must have been a stage name... Well, I’d have the opportunity to ask questions like that later.

“So should I take it that I will be temporarily joining your company?”

“Yes. I have had the honor to see you on magivision occasionally, and I would love for you to participate in our next stage play. I asked my aunt to get in contact with you.”

I see.

If he had seen me on magivision, then it stood to reason that he would be aware that I was acquainted with Mrs. Rhyme. Though even before that, it was now likely common knowledge that the Listons and the Rhymes were good friends. Information was the lifeblood of the upper class, after all.

“In that case, may I ask that you please just refer to me as Nia?”

“Sorry?”

“I came here because I was commissioned to stand on your stage. So I would like you to treat me not as the daughter of the Liston family but as Nia, a girl who will be working under you, the artistic director. Surely it would not sit well with the other actors were you to address me in such an official fashion. Besides, it would make it difficult for me, as well, to be treated like a guest the whole time.”

After a little thought, Julian nodded. “Okay, I got it. I’m looking forward to working with you, Nia.”

Just as we finished that exchange, there was a knock at the door, and it immediately opened.

“I’m so sorry I’m late! Has Miss Liston already— Ah. She has...”

A man—no, a woman who looked identical to Julian came flying in.

*Oh, this is the star actress of the Ice Rose.*

*Lucida Lordheart:*With the same title as her twin brother, Julian, she was the star actress of the troupe.

*I understand why they're referred to as twin princes now.*

I had seen her performing on magivision, as well. I had been told she was an actress who often took on male roles, a gallant woman in masculine clothing. That was why, though she was a woman, the twins were referred to as the Twin Ice Princes.

Personally, I thought she looked more feminine than masculine with her makeup off. Not that I would deny she could also make a pretty man. She *was* identical to the handsome Julian, after all.

"Sorry I'm so late, auntie." Given Mrs. Rhyme was higher on the social ladder here, Lucida made sure to greet her first, before she knelt down beside me. "Miss Liston, please forgive my rudeness for being so late to our first meeting."

"It's all right, but please treat me as just another of your company members, Lucida." I accepted her apology, wanting her to hurry up and refer to me as just Nia and also to take her seat. Honestly, I'd much rather she do away with the theatrics in general. Lynokis was getting way too excited by all this. I could feel her passionate gaze. I could hear her now... Deep inside, she was most certainly all, "Young Mistress! It's the Ice Rose! No, it's the Twin Ice Princes! The Twin Ice Princes, I tell you!"

Lucida gazed at me for a moment, then smiled. A smile like a rosebud falling open... Truly the star actress, I could already feel her charm.

"You are exactly as I expected," Lucida suddenly said.

She had expectations?

"Lucida was the one who had suggested we send an offer to you, actually," Julian said. "Lucida, hurry up and sit down or Nia won't be able to eat her meal."

"I know, I know." Lucida stood up and took a step back. "It's a pleasure to



meet you. I'm Lucida Lordheart, an actress of the Ice Rose Theater Company."

"Nice to meet you. My name is Nia. Thank you very much for calling me here today. I am but a beginner, but I will do my absolute best in this role."

With the overly formal introductions out of the way, we jumped right into the much more casual and relaxed dinner.

Lucida and Julian had many interesting and strange stories, as they had been stage actors since they were children.

But those were the *only* stories they told me.

I had no doubt that they had experienced many things that were uninteresting and most certainly unpleasant. I wasn't as popular as my brother, but still, the mental and physical strain of dealing with popularity was often difficult. I tended to forget the small unpleasant things not long after, though.

Not that I expected anyone would consider mentioning such lurid stories to a child unless circumstances called for it.

I had told Lynokis multiple times that she could excuse herself if she wished, but she resolutely stayed where she was, and before long, dinner turned into dessert.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Rhyme spoke to the twin princes when there was a lull in our talk. She had simply been listening the whole time. Now that I paid attention, Mrs. Rhyme and Lucida's eye colors were the same. It seemed it was true that they were relatives.

"You can be the one to decide, Lucida," Julian prompted.

"Got it. Leave it to me."

Lucida turned to look at me with firm eyes that completely dispersed the relaxing atmosphere we had been enjoying. Clearly, they wanted to tell me something.

"Nia, if you had been a regular girl, I probably wouldn't say this to you. But you really are the kind of child that both my aunt and I had assumed. So let me tell you this."

I could see where this was going.

“There’s a reason you called for me in particular, isn’t there?”

I was a total stranger to stage plays. Ordinarily, you would think that those who were serious about the field would be completely against someone like me joining their company.

Actors put blood, sweat, and tears into every performance, coming face-to-face with their role, putting every ounce of energy into becoming someone else. That was how they touched people’s hearts. That was even more the case for an esteemed theater troupe. If they were short of people, they would want to call in someone with experience, not an absolute newbie.

That was what I had thought at first, and it appeared my line of thinking had been correct. I had not been asked to take on this offer because of my ability to act. That settled with me much nicer, honestly.

“This may cause you offense, but the truth is...”

A day had passed since the dinner with Mrs. Rhyme, Julian, Lucida, and, in some sense, Lynokis.

After spending a night at the hotel, I went with Lynokis to the rented space that the Ice Rose would rehearse in. Though the group was popular, they were still very young, so they were yet to have their own rehearsal space. They would rent out this space each month and use it whenever their next play was chosen.

“Good morning.”

We had arrived a little earlier than the designated time. There was a wooden plaque outside the room that read “Rented out by the Ice Rose Theater Company,” so there was no mistaking that we had come to the right place.

I opened the door and... Ah, there they were.

The blue-haired twin princes I had met yesterday were present along with around ten other actors, all stretching or looking over their scripts. It very much gave off the impression that they were about to start training.

Julian and Lucida smiled at me when they saw me come in, but before they

could make their way over...

“You’re late, rookie!”

A hotheaded girl with blonde hair mixed with red stomped over to me.

*This must be the girl that they mentioned.*

“You might be some aristocrat’s daughter, but right now, you’re a rookie! And if you’re a rookie, you should be here before everyone else, cleaning the rehearsal space!”

“I apologize. I will keep that in mind.”

Hm... She wasn’t bad.

I heard Lynokis click her tongue behind me, though. Guess she didn’t agree.  
*Perhaps I’d better tell her to watch her mouth and her fists.*

Thankfully, it appeared that the blonde girl had not heard Lynokis’s little sound of annoyance. There was really no need for us to fight, so I was lucky.

“Ugh, this is why I *hate* rookies!”

I had no idea if my response was enough to placate her, but after saying her piece, the girl turned around and returned to her original place.

Actually, my response probably meant nothing. She likely just wanted to get in the first shot. I understood that. A preemptive strike could influence a whole battle. Though, in my case, I’d usually let my opponent preemptively strike and use up all their energy, and then I’d swoop in for the win. Me moving first would make the whole thing a trivial waste of time. That was what it meant to be strong.

That aside, Julian and Lucida were giving awkward smiles behind the girl. I nodded at them to show that it was all right.

The blonde girl’s name was Sharro White. She was the up-and-coming star actress of the Ice Rose Theater Company.

“Young Mistress.”

“Yes?”

“Let’s do away with her already.”

“Please stop with such suggestions.”

Four days had passed since the company’s rehearsals had begun, and Lynokis’s blood had been quietly simmering.

“Then at least allow me to help—”

“This is my role.”

I was running from wall to wall with a dry mop in hand. I went backwards and forwards many a time.

“That’ll do it.”

Do a thorough wiping of the surfaces once every week, and a quick mop at the start and end of every morning training. That was the job given to me, as the newcomer. Sharro’s outburst was partly what led to this, but I had also chosen to do it of my own volition.

*This brings back memories.*

Ensuring the area in which you trained was cleansed was the greatest respect one could show to their commitment to martial arts.

Who had said that again? I couldn’t quite remember, but I had the feeling that they were words of warning given to me while I was still arrogant about my own strength.

Facing and improving oneself was the core of martial arts. But martial arts were a power that you exerted outwardly. Show nothing but the greatest thanks and respect to all in a place of practice—to all the fellow dojo members and martial artists, to the environment in which you face yourself, to your blood and your flesh.

Without that, you were practicing not martial arts, but violence.

This was the third day of cleaning the rehearsal space before morning exercises. The more I did it, the more I felt like I was close to remembering something. Perhaps that was the reason I didn’t dislike going through the motions of cleaning this space, or perhaps it was simply because I didn’t resent the chance to move my body.

I chased away Lynokis and her constantly exuding murderous intent, finished up the cleaning, and put the tools away. Starting yesterday, I'd had her leave the rehearsal space until lunch. She was just annoying while she was present, so this was much better for me.

"Good morning."

The company members filtered in while I was putting the cleaning tools away. The first to arrive was Julian—he was always early. I thought that he was coming early out of consideration for me at first, but it turned out this was the norm.

The rest of the members trickled in after that, including that girl, Sharro White, the one who had had a go at me on the first day. The only one who came right at the starting time was the artistic director's sister and star actress of the troupe, Lucida.

"All right, let's get started. Stretches first," Julian called out once most of the members had arrived. There were those stretching by themselves, some in pairs, and others who had already finished.

"Shall I assist?" I asked Sharro, sitting on the floor.

"I-I'm...fine!" Her legs were open wide, and she was bending her upper body forward, but she seemed stiff. If she couldn't do the splits properly, she'd hurt herself. "And anyway, how can...you manage to...do that?"

Sharro was pushing her body to stretch so much that she was running out of breath, but she was looking over at me right beside her as I stood on one leg and pulled the other above my head, probably wondering how I could possibly be so flexible.

The easy answer was because flexibility came with martial arts. If your body was too stiff, it was difficult to move the way you wanted, and any sudden movements could lead to muscle tears. Your range of movement became much smaller. The more skilled a martial artist, the more flexible their body was.

Though, given she was a child, Nia's body was already plenty flexible. It didn't take long at all to be able to reach this stage.

After stretching my other leg in the same way, I put my feet together and

stretched my upper body down until my head was touching my knees. Sharro was watching me with frustration painted clear on her face.

“Shall I help you stretch your back? No need to be shy.”

“Wait, stop, don’t touch m—ooooowwwwww!”

“Whew, you really are stiff, aren’t you?”

“Ow, ow, ow, that hurts!”

*Stop your whining. If you want to become a first-class actress, you need to at least be able to do the splits.*

“Let’s get started with rehearsal, guys!”

After helping Sharro stretch—and partly messing with her a little—I felt the urge to practice my forms, but... Well, I couldn’t exactly do it here. I would have to wait until I was back at the hotel.

Sharro and I stood a bit apart and read our lines from the script. Sharro was the lead girl who would fall in love, and I was her daughter. After we finished one readthrough, I spoke up.

“Are you not going to say it today?”

“Huh?”

“You know, ‘Why do I have to babysit the rookie?’” They were the words she always said just before we started rehearsing, even on the first day.

“You really aren’t cute.”

Pot calling the kettle black, I’d say. Absolutely nothing about Sharro was cute right now. And I was far from a kid. Still, it seemed as if our relationship had shifted a little.

Upon noticing Sharro’s change, I remembered what Lucida had said that night when we first met at the Chocolate Lily’s Aroma.

There was floral tea and fruitcake laid out on the table in front of us, but no one moved to serve themselves. Lucida had begun to speak with a very serious look on her face. “This may cause you offense, but the truth is, we asked to be

put in contact with you because we want to use your confidence and popularity.”

*Not even hesitating to say “use,” are we?*

“No beating around the bush, I see.”

“I never intended to say this to you if you came across as a normal child. But I get the sense that if we tell you what we’re after, you’ll be able to act accordingly. You have such a bold personality unlike a regular child, and you’re also very composed at the same time. If you care about something, you learn quickly. I share those impressions seeing you here today.”

*Unlike a regular child, she says. That is the truth of the matter, so do forgive me.* There was no way I could keep up the act of a child forever.

“We intend to have a young actress take the lead role in our performance of *The Girl Who Fell in Love*. She’s the one who will become the star actress of our company.”

So they were putting a fresh face as the lead. The lead role would make her the widow that abandons her child.

“You won’t be taking that role, Lucida?”

“Nope. It’ll be performed by a nameless newbie. I think this role will actually be her first real debut. She’s had supporting roles here and there, but it’s her first time being a part of the main cast.”

In other words, this was doubling up as training for their successors. Male roles could very easily be performed by the two Ice Princes in front of me, so they probably wanted another star actress that could specialize in female roles, as opposed to Lucida.

“She has skill, and she’s very confident. Of course, I think she has the personality to be a lead actress, as well. Most of all, she’s long had the goal to become the lead, so she’s overflowing with motivation. The issue is that she’s maybe a little *too* motivated.”

Ahh, people like that certainly existed.

“She tries a bit too hard, I assume?”

“Exactly. She puts so much into her own performance that she gets tunnel vision and loses sight of the people around her.”

With the chance now in front of her, she was going overboard. It happened with a lot of people.

“Honestly, I think that if we just continue as we are, she’ll gradually calm down enough where she’ll be totally fine. But then there’s the issue of the role she’ll have to interact with a lot—the child role. We haven’t found a perfect fit to play off of her. As she is now, she’ll just fight with and eventually completely demoralize most of them.”

I see.

“So you decided to arrange for a child who could manage her?”

“Precisely. And when we landed on that solution, I immediately thought of you. You’re always so calm whenever I see you on magivision, so what if you were the one who could face her? You’re also someone popular enough to act as her stepping stone. Your popularity is actually rising in the capital.”

Even here? Perhaps there were restrictions in place for what people were allowed to tell me, but I didn’t get to hear much about my popularity while at the Liston estate. Who would have thought it? At least it meant there were results showing the effort I’d put in.

“In other words, you would like me to both play a role opposite the lead actress who is going a little overboard and also use my popularity to get this nameless actress into the spotlight.”

“Mm-hmm. What do you think?” Lucida linked her hands together on top of the table and flashed me a smile... But that smile was not a true smile. She had a slight joking look to her face, but it was otherwise serious. “Would you be willing to go along with the dirty tactics of adults that want to use you?”

I watched her quietly for a moment.

“Why not do as you want?” I asked, finally taking a sip of the floral tea that had piqued my curiosity since it was served.

*Wow, the scent is going in through my nostrils and spreading around my*



*body... This is amazing. These must be expensive leaves.*

“I was simply called here to be an actor for the Ice Rose Theater Company. Regardless of what circumstances, motivations, plans, or hidden intentions are involved in this, I am only here to do my work. If you wish me to do more than what was stated in the commission, then I cannot guarantee I will follow through, but if it *is* for my work, just use me as you require. I took this offer with that possibility already in mind.”

Should I succeed here, my popularity and reputation would increase, and I would be more likely to get more work in this manner. More importantly, this job was taking place in the capital, not the Liston territories. It was the perfect opportunity to do a targeted PR campaign.

In that sense, I was using them right back. I would be taking advantage of their commission. I would keep her words in mind, though. What she was essentially saying was that I needed to get Sharro White in line. That was all.

Two weeks had passed since I had started training with the theater company. The performance of *The Girl Who Fell in Love* would be in one week. The members were busy with both rehearsing and making the small props.

I had also memorized all of Sachute’s lines. I had heard they’d actually cut out quite a lot of the lines, though, since they were using a beginner child actor. The scriptwriter had looked regretful as he noted that he should’ve kept more lines in the script upon seeing how well I could do.

“Nia, let’s go through that one more time.”

Spend two weeks practically glued to someone out of necessity, and you’d come to like them, even if begrudgingly. Sharro White was finally much less intense than she had been at the start when she was constantly clashing with me and the other actors. She finally stood in line with everyone else, her eyes focused in the same direction.

That said, Lynokis still clearly had it out for her.

“Of course,” I replied, preparing to go through the scene again.

And so I began my third rehearsal of the day with Sharro in the role of the

widow Natasha, the lead. We were projecting our voices as if we were performing the real thing, so both of us were exhausted by the end.

The work of a stage actress was tough indeed.

“Young Mistress, it’s time.”

Lynokis, having removed herself from the premises until the afternoon on my orders, had come to pick me up. It was time to go to on location for *Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation*. Usually, I would be at rehearsal until the evening, but this time, it was only the morning for me. Julian and the other backstage staff in charge of things like the props would be around until night, so the cleanup was no longer my responsibility.

“Ah, are you off now? For recording, was it?” Sharro asked.

“Yes.”

Sharro’s enthusiasm had been far too forward at first, but she had calmed down now. I could sense her nerves, but she wasn’t making them apparent in her body language. She was managing to relax just the right amount.

*Sharro White:* She may have looked mature, but she had only just turned fourteen. Her blonde hair mixed with red had a very distinctive messy look to it, strands sticking out left and right. Heightwise, she was a little taller than average. Since she was still growing though, she was yet to fill out in the chest and bottom areas. She was quite the beautiful girl, with deep blue eyes that always sparkled with her strong will. Still, she didn’t match up to my brother’s good looks, though.

Sharro had come to the royal capital from the countryside all on her own to become a stage actress. Or, well, it was more like after graduating from the elementary school at Altoire Academy, she had stayed at the capital to join the Ice Rose instead of returning home.

It just so happened that right at that moment, the Twin Ice Princes had gone independent and were searching for stage actors, and so Sharro managed to squeeze her way in.

Two years had passed since then. Sharro had been given the opportunity to play the lead, and with an overabundance of confidence, she was filled with

motivation. But then the one cast in the child role was me, a mere beginner, and she was far from pleased.

In all fairness, if you had finally landed a dream role and then you were told that the one who would be performing alongside you was an absolute amateur who might end up dragging you down, of course you would be angry.

Not that that was for me to care about. I was there to simply carry out my work.

“Lynokis, did you bring up what I asked you to?”

“Ah, that, yes. They said if it was for a short time, it would be no problem.”

That was perfect, then.

“Artistic director, it appears we may be good to go.”

“Wait, really?!” Julian had been chatting with some of the prop makers, but the moment he heard me, he came running over. “Can we really advertise our performance on magivision?!”

His voice was so unexpectedly loud that the rest of the members couldn’t ignore what was being discussed and came over themselves. Surrounded by sweaty adults of various ages, I told them about what I had discussed with Julian.

“They said that so long as it’s short, you are perfectly allowed to advertise on magivision.”

Magivision had a real effect on publicity. The company would get to run an ad letting people know where and when they would be doing their performances. Of course, there was no guarantee it would increase turnout, but the likelihood was very high. At the very least, it wouldn’t *decrease* the number of patrons, so if there was no risk, why not just give it a shot anyway? It was absolutely a move they should take.

The reactions to this were split into two very different extremes.

“Sharro! Go get ’em!”

“Huh?”

“No, wait! We need to prepare an outfit! Makeup too! We’ve gotta get her fit for the camera!”

“Huh? Huh?”

“A bath should come first! She stinks of sweat from rehearsal!”

“Hang on, I don’t stink! I don’t...right?”

She was right; she didn’t, really. But this topic was admittedly making me a little self-conscious, as well. What about me?

The reactions of the members who didn’t know the effect magivision could have were much more subdued, but those that knew the value of such an opportunity, like Julian and Lucida, saw this as a chance to promote their company over a much wider area and were much more excited.

Well, regardless.

“Sharro, let’s go for a bath at my hotel together. Then we can get changed and go to the site from there.” I had intended to go for a bath before going to the recording, anyway, so I didn’t mind Sharro joining me.

We decided that I would take a bath and head straight to the location, whereas Sharro would return here after the bath to quickly get changed and have her makeup done first.

With that, we frantically left the rehearsal room.

“And cut!”

That was the first scene finished. The distinctive-faced director called an end to the scene, and I could feel myself relax.

“That was great, Nia! You’re charming today too! Let’s keep this up!”

Since we were filming in the capital, Bendelio, as the most senior member of the crew, had come to lead. It had been a bit of time since we last met, but his face was as distinctive as ever.

Today’s *Occupation Observation* was in the capital rather than the usual Liston territories, so I was learning how to make pasta at the capital’s most

popular restaurant, Chocolate Lily's Aroma. Yes, the exact same restaurant where I'd had my first meal in the capital with Mrs. Rhyme, Julian, and Lucida. We hadn't intended to do an episode here when we visited originally, but it appeared we just happened to have connections to it.

As the recording was taking place on such a busy street, we naturally ended up with a little crowd there to watch. It happened back in the Liston territories as well, so it wasn't all that surprising it was happening in the city too. Recording as a concept was probably still rare even here.

Next on the list was to record inside the restaurant, but first, this was the perfect time to slot in the ad for the performance. The weather was good, and we were right beside the main street. If we just adjusted the angle of the camera a little, they could record me and Sharro with Altoire Castle in the background. It very much exuded the atmosphere of the royal capital. And besides, the inside of the restaurant had nothing to do with theater.

All we were doing now was waiting for Sharro to return from the rehearsal space dressed up ready for the big moment, but...she was yet to arrive. Instead, Lynokis was the one who approached.

"Young Mistress, may I have a moment?" she whispered, a stern look on her face. Whatever it was, it must have been serious.

"Has something happened?" I asked as quietly as she had so people couldn't overhear.

"Sharro White is currently being harassed by some thugs."

She was what?

She was getting *harassed by thugs*?

Lynokis told me that while I was filming the first scene, she had gone off to try and find Sharro since she was late. And when she found her, Sharro was surrounded by about five thugs down an unpopulated back alley.

No doubt she had tried to find herself a shortcut.

"I am *your* personal attendant and bodyguard, so I chose not to interfere."

"You made a good judgment."

Everyone had their own circumstances. Lynokis was loyal to her work to a fault, and she prioritized me over Sharro. That was all. If she had acted based on her personal feelings towards Sharro, I may have questioned her choice. But, like so, Lynokis had reported the incident to me. If she had left Sharro alone because of her dislike for her, she wouldn't have told anyone about what was happening.

She was awaiting my commands before she made any action.

“Get the guards or militia here as soon as possible.”

“Understo— What? *I’m* the one to fetch them?”

“A rising star is in trouble. Hurry and go.”

“B-But there are so many other people here. Surely you can send someone else?”

“What are you complaining about?! Hurry!”

Upon hearing me unusually raise my voice, Lynokis's eyes immediately narrowed. What a look of suspicion that she made absolutely no attempt to hide. “You don't plan to go yourself, do you?”

“Hm? Whatever could you mean?”

“You do not intend to go save that girl, do you? Let alone by yourself. You aren't thinking, ‘Oh goodness, a strong foe I can beat up has finally appeared, I'm so super-duper excited!’ are you?”

“Of course not!”

I was just going to go and have a look to see how much danger Sharro was in and, if it turned out the situation was bad, turn it into a little violent time! I wasn't excited at the thought of that—how rude! Just what fun was there in beating up thugs and small fry that you can find just about anywhere?! Fun could only be found against a truly strong opponent! With weak opponents, you had to take care not to go overboard, and you had to pull back just before they were about to croak so you could enjoy it for as long as possible!

“Hurry up and go! Hurry, hurry! Hurry and go already! Come on!”

With nothing else to say but her face still filled with obvious skepticism,

Lynokis left as ordered, but not without turning round multiple times to check that I was still there.

Lynokis left.

She... She left, right?

*All right, let's go! Man, this is the first time since I started living as Nia that I've felt so super-duper excited!*

I asked Bendelio to wait a moment and sneaked my way out past the production crew and the crowd that had gathered.

*I think Lynokis said that she saw Sharro somewhere down this alley... Ah, there! Oooh, it's like they waited just for me! A whole five of them too!*

"Who are you?! Let go of me!"

"It's fine, come on! You're practically begging us to grab you dressed like that. We'll make sure to show you a good time."

Wonderful!

Sharro, having donned the glamor of an actress with her outfit and makeup, was surrounded by five men. Her arms had been restrained so she couldn't make her escape.

Hm.

*This is... This is...!*

The fact that the victim was being restrained against her will meant that even if one or two of them were to die, it would simply be deemed self-defense! I couldn't hold back my excitement!

Though, were I to be a little selfish, I *did* wish that there had been someone powerful here. It was more than apparent that all five of them were just thugs worth less time than even filing my nails.

Would they pull out a knife? I really hoped they would.

I wasn't asking for too much, but I did hope that they would at least make me feel even the tiniest bit of nervousness. You know, like, if I approached them half asleep and didn't pay enough attention, I could suffer a scratch—that kind

of nervousness.

I approached them while hiding my growing excitement. “U-Um...”

“Huh?”

The men and Sharro all turned to look at me.

“C-Could I join in?” *Whatever will I do if they refuse?* I thought fearfully to myself as I asked to join them with feigned caution.

“Wait, no, you shouldn’t be here! Someone help!” Sharro shouted upon recognizing me.

“Now hold on a minute!”

Two of the thugs approached, one blocking my path, the other grabbing me by the arm.

“Hah hah hah! This stupid kid just made this *much* easier.”

“You’re a smart girl. If you keep wasting our time, we’ll snap the little girl’s arm in two,” one of the thugs threatened Sharro.

Wow, so original.

*But you’ve only made my job easier.*

“Hey...” I turned to the thug with the grip on my arm.

“Huh?”





“You’ve involved me now, right? I’ve been forcefully involved, so I have no choice but to deal with you, right? This counts as self-defense, right? Though really, you should grip my arm harder, or...” I took my free hand, wrapped it around the thumb of the hand holding on to me, and yanked it right back. “...you might just break a couple fingers, you know.”

Like a thick tree branch, the finger finally couldn’t resist the pressure and snapped.

“GWAAAAAAAAAH! Gh!”

Just as he started to scream, my toes were in his throat.

It was a simple roundhouse kick—one from a five-year-old who was recently sickly, and at a hundredth of the strength of her past life.

In fact, as a child, my muscle mass was barely reliable. That was why I went for a kick, since I could put more force behind that than a punch. The throat could be a fatal spot, though, so it may have been for the best that it wasn’t too powerful.

*If I do kill him, though, it would just be in self-defense, so really, I have no need to worry.*

“Mmmm, I definitely think those a little tougher are more my type.”

It was undeniable that they were a weak bunch. There wasn’t even any need for me to make use of my chi. Techniques carried out with proper form would be more than enough to win, even in the body of a child. But, well, I suppose they made up for it a bit with numbers.

Hitting without needing to feel guilty felt good. There were four more people I could throw this energy at. We didn’t have much time, but I was on cloud nine, so I decided I may as well take my time and enjoy our bout for as long as I could!

“Who the hell is this kid?!”

After I took my sweet time playing around with three of the thugs—who were now sprawled out on the ground—the last one, who had been keeping a hold

on Sharro, finally broke down. He violently shoved the girl away and pulled out a knife with shaky hands, face distorted in fear.

*This is why I hate such pathetic thugs. They get consumed by fear so easily.*

How boring.

But just before I could let him go, he said something interesting I couldn't ignore. "Wh-Who do you think we are?! Don't you see this mark?!"

"Mark? Are you with the mafia?" I'd cared so little about them I had barely paid attention at first, but upon further inspection, the four sprawled on the ground *did* wear a similar symbol. And that meant only one thing!

"Does that mean you have reinforcements? Really strong ones? A large number of them is perfectly fine. Do you have around one hundred? Maybe even more? Oh, don't worry, I won't *completely* annihilate them. So please do gather even stronger people."

"No, seriously, what *are* you?!"

Hm? Why did he look even more frightened? That was strange.

"Calm down now. Take deep breaths. You can run if you want. I can just wake up the four over there and ask them instead. Let's see... How about I come find you late at night two weeks from now? Prepare a nice welcome for me. Okay? Promise? That's a promise, yeah?" With that said, I ripped the patch with the symbol off of one of the unconscious thugs. Was the design a dog? Maybe they were just a street gang rather than a mafia. Well, whatever the case, all I would need to do was ask around about the mark, and surely I would find their meeting grounds.

"Are you listening? That's a promise, yes? I'll get mad if you break it."

He was so frightened there was no way to keep up any semblance of a conversation. So there was no reason for me to continue hanging around.

"Then I'll see you again in two weeks. Let's go, Sharro."

It seemed about time for Lynokis to arrive with either guards or the militia, so I needed to let them go before then. I still had to record after this, so I couldn't leave the area, which meant I would need to tell whoever came to help that the

thugs had run off.

And then the gang would come back to find me in two weeks with reinforcements in tow like a little school of migratory fish, laughing away.

*Ahhhh, I can't hold back the excitement... I can't hold it back at all!*

“So what was that all about, hm?” Sharro asked.

Bendelio hadn't come by his senior position in the production crew by chance; by the time I made it back, he had already gotten everything set up and ready to record the advertisement in front of Altoire Castle. He had a real eye for framing the most stunning sights. Though we hadn't worked together in a while, he was still as talented as ever.

We were keeping both the restaurant staff and the crew waiting, so Sharro and I wasted no time in recording the ad for the stage show.

Sharro White, as the lead actress, and I, as the abandoned child, made sure to very clearly state when the Ice Rose would be putting on their performance of *The Girl Who Fell in Love*.

The play would run for one week. We would be doing both a matinee and an evening show on two days, but the rest would only have shows in the evening.

We had one more week of rehearsals ahead of us and then one week of the real thing. Right after closing would be my scheduled bloodbath. That was what was left for me to do in the capital. Saving the best for last wasn't such a bad idea. Just counting down the days would no doubt get me excited.

Well, before I would get that chance, I needed to deal with this advertisement first.

In hindsight, having the Twin Ice Princes or even just Lucida do this rather than a nameless actress would have had far more of an impact, but hey, no one was used to this sort of thing yet, so mistakes were to be expected.

“I just went to help you,” I told her. Sharro could ask all she wanted about what happened, but I couldn't answer much more than that.

“You're obviously lying.”

Sharro, who looked considerably older than fourteen right now—with her costume of a tight chic dress and rather flashy stage makeup—very clearly told me I was lying.

Incidentally, I also knew that she was ever so slightly padding out her breasts.

“You were having so much fun hitting them. You didn’t come to save me; you just wanted to fight someone, didn’t you? Why can you even fight like that in the first place?”

“Well, that isn’t fair. I heard that you were in trouble and rushed over in a panic.”

“Yes, yes, thank you for that. It’s pretty clear that you were thinking of me second, but I am grateful.”

Oh, how she wounded me. My desire to beat up those thugs was just as strong as my desire to save her.

“Ah, do excuse me. I have my own shoot after this.”

Sharro’s screen time was done, but I still had to get the footage in the Chocolate Lily’s Aroma recorded. I very much wanted to quiet Sharro before she ended up telling someone, especially Lynokis, what had happened, but it appeared we had run out of time.

On a related note, the guards that Lynokis brought did a simple and quick questioning before letting me go. The Liston name really came in handy for times like that. The biggest problem was that Lynokis had been looking at me skeptically the whole time. She would absolutely keep pestering me about this once the shoot was finished. What a bother...

Well, enough about her for now. I was about to get the chance to work at Chocolate Lily’s Aroma for a day. With the time and effort already taken up for the play ad, I couldn’t keep them waiting any longer.

For some reason, while the production crew was transporting all their things inside the restaurant, Bendelio came over to me. “Nia, could I talk to you for a minute?”

*What’s going on?*

Usually, he would go straight to speak with the guest to do one last run-through of the episode.

Before I could ask what happened, though, he snapped his fingers and pointed at Sharro.

“You are sublime. How about we film this episode with both of you? It’ll help word of your play get around, as well.”

“Huh?”

Sharro was surprised, but so was I. We had done many episodes of *Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation*, but this was the first time he had ever suggested we have two hosts.

“We’ve come all this way to the capital, after all. May as well make the episode feel a little special by bringing on a guest host.”

He wanted to make it feel special, did he? Well, I just listened to whatever the director wanted to do in the moment. If they told me to do something, I would simply do my best to oblige.

“If you think it would work, I don’t mind,” I said.

If it was Bendelio in charge, he wouldn’t mess this up. Pleased with my answer, he turned to look at Sharro.

“What do you think? The pay isn’t the best, but if anything goes wrong, Nia will be able to step in to help, so you can just take it at a relaxing pace. You’ve come here all prettied up and such; I think it would be worth a shot. Unless you hate being in front of the camera?”

“U-Um...” Sharro looked troubled as she turned to me, but I wasn’t quite sure why she’d be so nervous.

“Is there any reason to hesitate? You finally got the leading role in a play. Don’t you want to do whatever you can to help it succeed? Then you should take every opportunity to promote it.”

“When you put it like that, you’re right. There’s not really any reason to refuse.”

And so, with that spontaneous change of plans, we recorded the next episode

of *Occupation Observation* as a pair. Together with the nameless actress Sharro and a middle-aged male chef at Chocolate Lily's Aroma, we made pasta as we had agreed in the briefing.

Sharro was certainly nervous, and the chef was even more nervous than her, so I struck up a conversation with them while we worked, and the two gradually relaxed.

We spoke about how to make the pasta and the sauce, things to pay attention to when making them, how you should approach making pasta, what you should be thinking about while making it, the chef's successes and failures in the culinary industry, Sharro's taste in boys, the chef's taste in women, a story about the first time he made a meal for a woman, the fact that the chef was still single and looking for a girlfriend, and what the chef deemed an ideal girlfriend, and then just as the chef started fervently appealing that he was looking for a serious relationship, the recording for that part ended.

All we had left was to taste what we'd made and we would be done for the day. This was meant to be my lunch, so I hadn't had anything to eat since the morning. Trying to control when I ate for this kind of thing was always a pain.

"Thank you for today, Nia." According to the chef, the royal capital's broadcasting station had come to interview them once before, but he had been so nervous that he could barely cook or speak properly, and it ended up scrapped before it could be aired on magivision. That previous failure was why he had been so nervous when we started filming. "It was all thanks to you that this went so well. Really, truly, thank you!"

Most likely Bendelio, the rest of the production crew, and I were all thinking the same thing.

It went *too* well.

*This old man talks way too much. Don't try to appeal to potential girlfriends out of nowhere like that.*

Despite the problems, though, the recording ended without incident, which left the play a week later.

The rest of my time in the capital flashed by in the blink of an eye.

At first, I was only pretending I was busy to try and avoid Lynokis's questions about the incident with Sharro, but then I really did become incredibly busy. I couldn't even find the time to let my brother show me around, and opening night rolled around before we had the chance to spend any time together.

Rehearsals were carried out day after day in preparation for the performances, and I would end up as exhausted as the rest of the actors by the end. I was both an amateur and uninterested in entering the acting world, so there was no need for me to put so much effort in, but seeing the enthusiasm of those around me, I felt it important that my own performance be up to snuff, as well.

I was not so arrogant as to say that I had become as good as a pro when I was barely even a fledgling, so I had only polished my part as much as I could. It was good enough to at least get a passing grade, a performance that would at least not be painful to watch.

Once we were a few days away from opening night, Julian, Lucida, and all the other actors all showed incredible focus. They truly had faces of determination. A tenseness began constantly hanging in the air of the rehearsal space.

Even I couldn't ignore it any longer.

"Hey, Sharro."

"Hm?"

The lead actress had been watching the other actors from beside me when I called out to her. Everyone was naturally putting their all into their rehearsing, but Sharro was especially enthusiastic, as if trying to clamp down on this chance that had been given to her with all her might.

Back when rehearsals had first started, Sharro had often clashed with people due to her excessive passion and motivation.

"You can hit me if you wish."

Her brow creased in confusion. "Huh? What are you talking about?" Her unmoving gaze was still stapled to the others rehearsing. She appeared to have no idea what I meant.



“There’s that scene where you slap me across the face because I keep trying to follow you after you abandon me and run off with that man, Walker, right? You can hit me for real.” I could take as many slaps from a girl like her as I needed to. I had been thinking for a while now if, as a beginner, we needed to add that kind of real touch to the scene in order for me to actually contribute something of note. Something like that would surely add much more intensity to the scene.

“Ahh, I get where you’re coming from, but we absolutely can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I actually said the same thing once before, that it was okay to hit me for real. But the artistic director said that if you put too much into the performance and make it too real, the audience focuses too much on that and struggles to focus on the story. A play is just that, a play. If you go beyond making it a simple performance, the audience can’t watch it at ease, so we can’t do things like that. At least, that’s what he said.”

I see. Because it was a play, everything that was happening was unreal and safe, and that was what made it possible to watch and enjoy. Make it too realistic, and you couldn’t call it a performance anymore.

*You know, that’s true, actually.*

This performance of *The Girl Who Fell in Love* was being put on in order to sell Sharro White as their up-and-coming lead actress. The scene in which she chooses to abandon her child was meant to be a critical scene in which she changes from a mother to a woman madly in love. You could even say it was the scene in which she would truly get to show off her acting ability.

If, in such a dramatic scene, she were to actually hit me, a child, everyone’s attention would end up on me instead, whether out of worry or some other emotion.

As the title suggested, the protagonist was the woman who would fall in love. Given the play was aimed at a fairly mature audience, if the poor child who was slapped and then left abandoned were to stand out too much, many of the adults may find it painful to watch. The child was already being dealt a bad fate; of course it would grab their attention if the child was hit on top of that. If there

were to be an actual strike, they may not be able to enjoy the play.

*Acting is so complicated.*

They should just do a simple, clear, pleasant, exciting story where a complicated relationship is resolved with a single punch.

“That’s all for today! No staying late—all of you get home and get plenty of rest!”

Morning rehearsals soon became evening, and before long, Julian was dismissing us.

Two days were left until the first performance. That meant we had one more day to rehearse. No one had been allowed to stay late these past few days. Julian wanted to ensure that no one ended up getting ill or suffering any injuries due to excessive practice.

“Nia.”

“No.”

“Just for a bit. Please?”

“A bit will turn into a lot.”

“Oh, come on, please. I’m begging you.”

Since we hadn’t been allowed to stay late the past few days, Sharro had been crashing at my place, desperately wanting to continue running lines, and then—when it inevitably got too late—staying over. Somehow our relationship had gradually become rather unhealthy.

*This girl, I swear.*

If I weren’t the amateur here, I would have greatly resisted the proposition, but given I was the one holding the performance back, I supposed it wouldn’t be a bad idea to supply an environment that would allow the leading actress to perform comfortably.

I personally didn’t mind all that much if Sharro wanted to stay over anyway, so I was okay with it, but the problem was that since Sharro and I had been

getting close, Lynokis had been terribly unhappy. This was the real issue I had. It made things terribly difficult.

“Nia, could we talk for a sec?” Just as I was getting caught up in the girl doing all she could to persuade me, Julian came over. “Sorry I’m so late in asking this, but I want to give you some tickets. Do you have anyone you want to invite to the show?”

Oh, of course.

“Well, my family and some other acquaintances did ask me to pass them on if I received any.”

Let’s see, first were my parents, then Neal... Oh, and Lynette, of course. It was best I not separate them. And then Bendelio had also said with his distinctive face that he would love a ticket. Lynokis would be in the wings so I didn’t think she would need a ticket to attend. My grandfather on my father’s side apparently wanted to come as well, but I’d heard nothing more since. It seemed like he *might* come? But it also seemed quite possible that he wouldn’t.

*Guess I can just skip his ticket. Not like I’ve ever met him.*

“I would like five tickets, please.”

“All righty, I’ll get you five tickets for the last show, then.”

The last one, hm? Thinking about it, I’d heard something about how they’d be recording the last performance. Nothing to worry about right this second, though.

My brother would probably be fine, but my parents and Bendelio would likely need to adjust their schedules, so a show later in the run was best. There would be about a week for them to make any changes, which should be enough notice.

“The opening day’s tickets all sold out, didn’t they?” Sharro asked cheerfully.

Julian nodded back with the same fervor. “Yeah, and not just opening. A lot of people have been sending in inquiries about the matinees, so numbers seem good for those too. That ad seems to be working its magic.”

The evening performances would continue all week, but we also had two

matinees which would have tickets sold on the day of rather than in advance. The company intended to call out to people on the street to see if they wanted to come watch. It was quite the forward method. Apparently, that was how other theater companies just starting out worked, so the Ice Rose had decided they should do the same.

“And Sharro, you know not to cause Nia trouble,” Julian admonished.

“Indeed,” I said.

“No way! I’m not causing you trouble, am I?! Just let me sleep over at your place again!”

“‘Just’ let you sleep over? *That’s* the part that’s causing me trouble. Can’t you go home?” I didn’t care whether Sharro stayed over or not, but I *did* care about how terrible Lynokis’s mood was recently. That was the troublesome part.

Despite all this, and as expected, Sharro ended up forcing herself into my room and then begged me to rehearse with her late enough into the night that she ended up staying over because it was too scary for her to walk back home.

And after all of that, the day of the first performance came.

Magivision was always on around the Silver family’s breakfast table.

*“P-Please come and see the Ice Rose Theater Company’s performance of The Girl Who Fell in Love!”*

An actress who looked tense with nerves announced the play with an inexperienced air. Her outfit and appearance made her look mature, but she seemed younger than that suggested.

*“We’ll be waiting for you on the stage.”*

The next to be shown was the pure white girl whose appearances on magivision had only increased since her debut. The contrast of an exceedingly calm little girl paired up with a nervous actress only served to draw even more attention to her.

*Nia Liston:* A show that bore her name and was recorded by the Liston broadcasting station had premiered in winter. And though not even half a year

had passed since her debut, she was already about to have her first appearance onstage.

“Hm.”

Vikson Silver, lord of the Silver territories, had the same thought he had every time this girl had appeared on his MagiPad at the breakfast table in the last few days: *She looks well. And incredibly calm.*

The first time he had seen the pale white girl who was always so composed that it was hard to believe she was only five years old, she had only just recovered from her illness. Her face had been worryingly pale, and she had been terrifyingly thin. But more recently, she had been gaining some meat on her bones and had begun looking like a regular child.

*Not that she acts like one.*

She was so calm and composed that Vikson couldn't believe she was the same age as his youngest daughter. Nia would visit many workplaces and try out their jobs as part of her magivision show. These varied experiences showed many sides of her, but not once had she shown panic or frustration.

“The actress looks fine, but Nia's clothes are still so lame.” Vikson's oldest daughter, the owner of a fashion label and turning twenty-seven this year, would say the same thing about Nia every time. He wasn't sure if she found it unpleasant or frustrating, but she would always scrunch up her face.

On top of all that, she had no intentions of getting married.

“Heh heh, heh heh heh... Niaaa, I'll definitely make sure to go watch you perform... Heh heh heh...” His second daughter, the twenty-year-old artist, was a fan of the girl. But the way she would always leer and giggle and rake her eyes down the girl's body just made her look like a criminal.

It made him sad as her father, but every time, Vikson was made more than aware that this girl was truly unsuitable for marriage.

His third daughter was currently at the dorms for the high school of Altoire Academy, so she wasn't present.

And then there was his youngest, who was silent. She looked as unhappy as

she always did, but she was staring intently at the MagiPad.

*Just when did she start viewing Nia Liston as her rival?*

Despite how unhappy she looked, she wouldn't try to avoid seeing the young girl. Reliared would usually show her emotions clearly, but this was the first time Vikson had seen her bottle something up. She clearly didn't like Nia, but she *was* curious.

It was with this in mind that Vikson said his next words.

"Relia. How about we go watch the performance, hm?"

It would take less than half a day to get to the royal capital from the Silver estate. Get on an airship at night, have a little sleep, and you'd be at the capital in the morning. They said the performances would continue for a week, so a small adjustment of his schedule could allow him to squeeze in one day away at least.

Vikson wasn't even that diligent of a lord in the first place. He wanted to hand over the reins as soon as possible, after all. He would laze around all day if he could.

"Rikel seems like she's going. Why don't we all go together?"

Rikelvita, his second daughter, turned to her father with a questioning sneer and then looked at Reliared. Vikson almost instinctively told her not to look at him like that, but he managed to hold back.

"Sister, don't look at me with that face." Reliared couldn't manage the same, however. "I won't go. Why do *I* have to go all the way out there to see *her*? In what world would that be right? She should be the one to come to me."

"Heh heh heh, father only asked if you wanted to go see the show; he said nothing about going to see my precious, wonderful Ni— Wait, wait, I'm sorry, don't throw your fork! That's dangerous! Hang on!!!"

Reliared ultimately didn't go to see the performance in person. But upon watching the broadcast on magivision, she decided to go to the capital—not as a spectator, but as a performer.

At the same time as the rambunctious Silver breakfast table...

*“P-Please come and see the Ice Rose Theater Company’s performance of The Girl Who Fell in Love!”*

*“We’ll be waiting for you on the stage.”*

Displayed on magivision were the child actress who was already becoming the face of the Liston territories—Nia Liston—and a nameless actress standing side by side, giving their greetings.

The girl who was watching that advert muttered to herself, “So you’re here.”

The owner of the extravagant room was eating her breakfast alone. There were many ladies-in-waiting standing at attention, but they remained so still they almost seemed like dolls. “Send a message to my brother. I will be going to meet him at lunch.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Today’s schedule was a hospital visit, yes?”

“Yes, Your Highness. You are scheduled to go the moment school ends.”

“Very well.”

After the performance announcement, the show shifted to Nia Liston making pasta in a restaurant. The girl was tempted to watch more, but she finished off her meal and stood.

Third princess of the Kingdom of Altoire, Hildetaura was seven years old.

Having gained a reputation of being a surprisingly approachable princess, she had gained popularity through her appearances on magivision. There was no one in the capital who didn’t know her name.

She had been waiting for a girl of the same age as her to make an appearance in the limelight like this. And now, she had confirmed that one had sprung up. She had confirmed that the Liston family had begun trying to sell Nia’s name even outside their own territories. Their advancement of their recordings into the capital was proof of that.

If nothing impeded Nia’s path, the two of them would undoubtedly come

face-to-face on the screen. The competitive spirit deep within Hildetaura's heart was blazing in anticipation of it all.

Meanwhile, at a large warehouse district in the Royal Capital of Altoire...

The north, south, and west of the district were comparatively peaceful, being used for their intended purposes. But as one headed to the east, the district morphed into meeting grounds for those in the dark. The farther one proceeded through the area, the more worn down it appeared, becoming a common place for villains to hide, and there was a marked increase in shady establishments like underground arenas or illegal casinos.

The Kingdom of Altoire was known for being a peaceful and prosperous land with no slums, but this was one of its few dark secrets.

Deep within this territory was an old warehouse filled with items of unknown origin or ownership. That was where the base was located.

Given its original purpose, the building was large and always had dim lighting. There were tables and chairs haphazardly placed throughout it. The smell of alcohol and cigarettes clung to the air, and the men and women who were involved in these communities would spend much of their time there.

In a corner of that rowdy building was the seat dedicated to the leader—a man sitting on a valuable sofa with two scantily clad women sitting on either side of him. He was a vulgar man who loved gold accessories, so much so that he was covered head to toe with them. He also wore a shirt that bared his chest. Honestly, he was hard to look at from a man's perspective.

Surrounding that golden man were four of his trusted lackeys. The girls came and went, but everyone else was the same as always.

"You called, boss?" A man clad in black stopped in front of this dangerous group who so clearly made no effort to look like law-abiding citizens.

His name was Anzel, a bodyguard.

Anzel was slender, and though he wasn't exactly tall, he was clearly strong—strong enough to be hired to escort the leader of the mafia.



“Yo, Anzel.” The gilded man was laughing away for some inexplicable reason... He was the one who had hired Anzel, Nehilga. He was looking upon his bodyguard in one hell of a good mood, but his inability to remain steady made it seem as if he’d had a pint or two. “Well, whatever, sit yourself down.”

“I’m good. I’m just a bodyguard, after all.” Though it was an invitation directly from the boss himself, Anzel immediately refused.

“C’mon, man, take the stick out of your ass already.”

This was a familiar sight, so no one said a word.

“Sorry, boss. This is just one of those rules of mine, y’know?” Any work he picked up, he would absolutely fulfill. But he would not get too involved with the client. Those were Anzel’s two ironclad rules.

They were rules he had placed upon himself in order to survive among the trash that wandered in the underworld. Because he had these rules, he was trusted and given work. You don’t give work to someone you don’t trust, simple as that.

“Suit yourself. Got another job for you. Naturally, I’ve got the cash.”

“And what would that be?”

“Some of the younger kids... Man, what’d they call themselves again? Right, right, the Zigzag Dogs. They came back with something interesting to share.”

“Spare the details. They have nothing to do with me. What’re you wanting me to do?”

“Learn to lighten up, will ya? You’re gonna make a fine penny off of this one. You can afford to get excited about it.”

In truth, Anzel couldn’t care less.

“I’ll cut to the chase, then. Go beat the hell outta those kids. Ah, but make sure you don’t kill ’em.”

“Oh?”

That was one hell of an order—unreasonable, and without intentions that Anzel could parse. Kids who yearned for the underworld were nothing more

than convenient pawns that could be used and abused without repercussions. What reason could there be to get rid of them all at once?

Not that Anzel particularly cared for the exact reason, so he wouldn't ask.

"That's quite a tall order. You'll compensate me appropriately, yes?"

There were about twenty teams of young kids, and each of those teams surpassed a hundred members. That wasn't something he could just finish in one or two days.

"Sure, but there's one more thing."

"Another?"

"Kidnap Nia Liston for us. You know who she is, yeah?"

*There it is.*

Just before he had been called here, Anzel had loosely heard some of the details from one of his old female colleagues about how a child named Nia Liston had gotten wrapped up with some of Nehilga's lackeys, and he had gained an interest in her.

Honestly, Anzel hadn't been sure if this was something he'd be put on, but here he'd been hired by name. The first request likely was tied to Nia Liston, as well.

"Hard not to. Her name sometimes comes up in the newspapers. She's that famous young lady, class-four aristocrat, yeah? And you want me to kidnap her? I'd appreciate it if you'd ask someone else for that one."

"You what?"

"I'm nothing more than a bodyguard. Cleaning up the small gangs around here falls under protecting you, so I have no qualms with that. But kidnapping a kid is an entirely different matter."

Anzel didn't particularly want to pick a fight with the aristocrats either. The gap between aristocrat and commoner had decreased over the years to the point that they weren't all that different now. But that didn't mean he didn't have boundaries.

Kidnapping an aristocrat's kid would spur the Altoire army into action. Do that and he was a goner. In fact, the whole eastern warehouse district would probably get crushed in the cross fire.

"Tch, fine, whatever. Then just get those kids dealt with. We'll do the kidnapping. That better?"

"Much. In that case, consider it done."

And so, Anzel was on the move.

His objectives? To take out the gangs...and check in on Nia Liston.

## Chapter 8: After the Curtain Closes

“Don’t talk to me so flippantly. Even if he died, I would forever be his.”

This was the ninth time that opening line of *The Girl Who Fell in Love* had been uttered by the widow, Natasha.

Though there had been various small mishaps like props breaking or costumes tearing, some mistaken lines or mistimed prop cues and spotlights, the show could largely be called a success.

Whether because of the effect of the magivision ad or because the company utilized my popularity, each day brought progressively more and more people into the audience.

There was no doubt that this would be the performance that broke the nameless actress Sharro out of obscurity, just as Julian and Lucida had hoped.

What was surprising was that despite the more adult themes of the play, there were quite a few in the audience who were around my age. I knew that my brother and his friends and acquaintances would likely come to watch, but there were way more children than I had imagined there would be.

Personally, the contents of the play were rather tough for children to watch; after all, it depicted a child being ruthlessly abandoned by her mother. Nothing about it was good for these youths to see. Just how did their parents feel bringing them to watch a story like this? Surely it was bad for their education.

Well, regardless, when we finished the final performance, we all came onstage for the curtain call to uproarious applause, and so the curtain closed without incident.

Given I was the amateur here, I was very relieved that I hadn’t made any mistakes that completely messed up the run. Those audience accolades may be an actor’s greatest reward, but for me, it signaled that I had sufficiently completed my duty as a daughter of the Liston family. Relief had washed over me when the curtain came down.

I could only pray this would lead to further work.

“Nia, someone’s here to see you.”

Hm?

While I was sharing in the joy of a successful closing night backstage with the other actresses, wiping away sweat, cruelly shaking off the sobbing lead actress, cleaning off my makeup, getting changed, and trying to keep the lead actress from getting all up in my face (why was she being so annoying?), Lucida suddenly called out to me.

“Nia!”

When I turned around, I saw Lucida, my parents, Neal, Lynette, and Bendelio standing with an unfamiliar older man. That was likely my grandfather. He’d still come even though I hadn’t sent him a ticket.

Though the Ice Rose was talented and had renown, they were still a small theater company starting out. The changing rooms were split by gender, but we had a shared room where everyone did their makeup together. Though even if it was bigger, it was still narrow.

Seeing the size of the place still crowded with all the members of the company, my family immediately caught on and excused themselves, letting me know they’d be waiting for me at the restaurant. As for what restaurant, I was sure Lynokis would let me know when I met up with her outside the performance hall.

I didn’t want to keep them waiting, so I tried to change as fast as possible.

“Was that your family?” Sharro asked.

“Yes. I’m going to get changed, so can you please give me some space?”

Sharro still needed to get changed herself.

The children would head home after this, but surely the adults would be going off to have a drink to celebrate. They’d be having all kinds of alcohol, spicy, sweet, and strong. Meanwhile, I was stuck going to a restaurant with my family. It pained me so much. *Hurry up and go already. Get yourself wasted and give*

*yourself a hangover.*

“Man, I haven’t gone back to see my family since I graduated from elementary school. So that’s, like, two, three years, I think?”

“Then why not return home? Also can you please back off?”

“Well, it’s just... My family’s all farmers, y’see? If I go home, who knows if they’ll let me come back. They’d force me to help with the fields, and then they’d force me to get with a proper man and I’d be stuck being a farmer’s wife for life. I hated the thought of that so much that I just avoided going home and jumped right into the acting sphere ‘cause it’s what I was really interested in. I do want to go home, but I still haven’t made it to the point that I could do this as a living. So I probably can’t go back yet.”

“Wow, I see. Seriously, can you back off?” Everyone had their own circumstances, so I wasn’t going to tell her what she should do, but I did hope that this wouldn’t be something that she greatly regretted later. Also I *really* wanted her to back off.

“Sharro, about later today...”

Thankful for the chance Lucida gave me by dragging away the honestly annoying lead actress who kept hovering around me, I quickly got myself changed.

“If you’ll excuse me, everyone.”

With that done, I said my farewells to the rest of the actresses. Over time, I’d gotten close with a lot of the members of the company, not just Sharro. We had all spent about a month together, after all, seeing each other every day and getting very involved with each other over the course of our rehearsals. It would have been strange if we *didn’t* get somewhat close.

These were people I would be saying goodbye to forever unless I received another job offer. It felt sad in ways, but meetings and farewells were a part of life. This wasn’t a parting I could avoid, and I wasn’t good with sappy stuff, so I decided to leave as soon as I could.

I wanted to at least say something to Julian, but he wasn’t backstage. He always saw off the audience after every performance.

“Ah, Nia— You hold your horses, Sharro,” Lucida said, grabbing the star by the collar when she mysteriously tried to charge into me. “Julian said that he’s gotta break down the set tonight, so he probably can’t see you off. He and I will see you at your hotel tomorrow morning, so you can head straight off.”

Oh, well, okay then. So I could just leave. I wouldn’t know until tomorrow, but right at that moment, Julian was actually meeting with the third princess Hildetaura, who was asking to be introduced to me.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” I left the room with the actresses all seeing me off. I met up with Lynokis, who was waiting for me by the stage door, and we headed off to the restaurant to see my family.

“Your final performance was absolutely the best,” Lynokis said.

“In a way, every performance before now was just a rehearsal for this.”

Of nine performances, eight were rehearsals. Stand onstage over and over, and you’ll naturally get more accustomed to it. So of course the last performance would be the most polished. On top of that, the final performance was the one being aired on magivision. I was so focused during the performance itself that I never even saw if there were any cameras, but they had no reason *not* to record it, so I had no doubt they’d been set up somewhere.

“We can finally say farewell to that girl. Oh, I was just so close to giving in to impulse and doing away with her,” Lynokis said a little too candidly.

“Please do not say or consider doing such a thing.”

“But I can’t help it. That girl would always get all up close and personal with you over the night, and then in the afternoon she’d just abandon you. It was like... Don’t you think I’d be forgiven if my hand just happened to slip?”

“You would not.”

Sharro’s nightly intrusions were one thing, but when she said that Sharro would just abandon me, did she mean during the play? That was quite literally her role; what else was she meant to do?

Lynokis and I continued talking about such trivial things as we walked down

the night streets to the restaurant. The royal capital at night was a lively place indeed. The streetlights were bright, and many were still walking around.

The performance had come to an end. In other words, two weeks had passed since I made my promise to the thugs. I had finished my work successfully, which meant I could now welcome the promised day with no worries, reservations, or regrets.

The true enjoyment of my stay in the capital would now begin.

“No, I still can’t drink either.”

Given I was a child, I went for a meal with my family, while the adults went off to celebrate with drinks.

At least, that’s what was supposed to happen.

Instead, I got jumped by Sharro, who was waiting for me in the lobby of the hotel after I returned from my meal. Sharro was fourteen, meaning she still couldn’t legally drink, so she had only been allowed to have a meal as well.

“Why are you here?”

That was the biggest mystery now. It wasn’t as if we had a reason to run lines together anymore. *Go back home. To your own home.*

“Come on, it’s fiiiiine.”

She was right. It was fine. Her presence or lack of it meant nothing to me. But then there was Lynokis right behind us emitting the most silent deadly aura she could. I had no idea if Sharro was aware or not. The heart of an actress was hard to read.

I personally had no reason to refuse, though. Today would be our last day together, so Lynokis could live with her anger for a bit longer.

I got myself bathed, dried my hair, applied some toner to my face, and began preparing myself for bed.

“I had something I wanted to ask.” Sharro was already in her underwear underneath my covers. For the record, I had already let Lynokis go for the night.



For the *further* record, apparently the rest of the Ice Rose all went to a big bathhouse together and then went straight to partying. It didn't take a genius to guess that they were going to drink until they passed out. I was jealous. How inappropriate. I was jealous.

"You want to know the secret of my strength? Meat. Meat is how you get stronger."

"I said nothing about that. And anyway, it's not like meat is the only factor."

Hm, maybe she was right. If all it took was eating meat to get stronger, people wouldn't struggle so much. And let's be honest, I was strong even without eating meat.

"But you're not that far off the mark. You remember when I got attacked by those thugs a few weeks ago, right? And you said something about seeing them again two weeks later. What happened with all of that?"

Oh. Honestly, I had completely forgotten that Sharro had been there when I made that agreement. Could you really blame me for forgetting and getting carried away when I finally had someone to fight for the first time in this body, and I felt all that adrenaline running through me? Sharro had never brought it up until now either.

The only reminder it had happened at all was the anticipation building in my veins as I counted down the days.

"That whole 'two weeks later' thing was just a joke."

"No way. You're totally going to take them up on that, aren't you?"

She guessed correctly. I had been looking forward to it, after all.

"I stayed as close to you as I could since then, but I've never seen you go out to their hideout even once. And that means that you're going soon, right?"

"Wait, have you been keeping watch over me this whole time? Is *that* why you kept staying over?" What an actress, indeed. Not once had any of her actions suggested that she was watching over me. I hadn't even considered it.

"Kinda? It was sort of something on the side. My apartment doesn't actually have a bath, so getting to borrow yours was a lifesaver."

My supervision or my bath: which was more important to her? Whatever the answer, it was a trivial matter.

“Sooo, you’re going, right?”

“No.”

“So I can tell Lynokis about the fight then?”

“I’m going. I’ve been looking forward to it this whole time. I’m definitely going. I’ll never forgive you if you stop me.” If she was going to pull out that card, then I wasn’t going to hide it. Lynokis absolutely could not know. I had no doubt she would report it to my parents, and then I’d be in even more hot water.

“Can’t you reconsider the dangerous stuff? I get it. You’re really strong. But it’s not a good idea to just jump into dangerous situations by yourself like that.”

Oh, I completely agreed.

“Ninety percent of those who live by the martial arts are fools. They spend years upon years—their whole life, even—pushing their body to its absolute limits, and then all it takes is a simple blade or the venom of a tiny insect and they’ll just drop dead. Naturally, accidents or disease can take them out too. There are times where things that you’ve spent copious amounts of your life on will disappear in a single moment. Do you understand? No matter how strong you are, you can never erase every single one of your weaknesses, and yet we seek further strength anyway. That is what it means to live the martial way. It isn’t smart at all, don’t you think? So of course I wouldn’t make such logical decisions.”

Especially in my case. Hell, I had quite literally died and come back to life, and my first thought was that I wanted to continue living a life in pursuit of martial arts—no hesitation. That was likely how I was in my past life as well. I knew no other way of living.

I had never considered an intelligent life path—only the fool’s path.

“Yeah, you’ve got a point.” Sharro gave a slight nod. “I don’t get all this martial arts stuff, but I totally get you saying you’re not the type to make smart decisions. And if we’re going down that line of thinking, I’m literally an actress

with no plans for her future. If I were smart, I'd be returning home and living a stable life on the farm."

Then surely she could understand where I was coming from.

"I'm going. Because it's something I have to do."

"Then take me with you."

What did she just say?

"You...want to come with me?"

"Well, you're unbeatable, aren't you? You don't intend to lose, at all. So what's the harm in me tagging along?"

Hmm...

Sharro found it hard to leave me alone now that she'd learned the truth. I was technically a five-year-old girl, after all. Any sane person would try to stop me right away. But Sharro wasn't doing that, not even by force. In fact, she might have simply realized that I wasn't someone who would listen in the first place.

As two people living the fools' life, we somewhat understood each other.

"You'll only get in the way if you get involved in the actual fight, but I don't mind you watching from afar. That's as far as I'm willing to compromise."

I was pretty sure that if worse came to worst, Sharro would want to put a stop to the situation, even if it meant getting physically involved herself, and that was why she wanted to join me. In which case, I would have her wait on standby at an area a little farther away, and if she thought things were getting bad, she could run off to call the guard or the militia. So long as she was at a suitable place to do that, things would be fine.

Not that she would need to do that, anyway.

"All right, works for me," Sharro agreed.

Early in the morning of the following day, Julian and Lucida came to visit me in my hotel room as they'd said they would.

"Nia, thank you for all your efforts. The performance was a complete

success.”

“It’s thanks to you that Sharro managed to debut successfully.”

When they saw Sharro was randomly in my room, they had both looked at her in confusion—and with identical faces too. They were twins after all.

“And with this, your commission is over. You carried out your work with no complaints from us.” Artistic Director Julian himself declared the end of my work.

My parents were the ones in charge of negotiating the commission fees, so I had no idea how much I would receive for this. In other words, I had no idea how much this would help the family’s funds, but at the very least, it was impossible for this to worsen them. Mrs. Rhyme had paid for the hotel costs, after all. In fact, I was pretty sure that her husband *owned* this place. He was a senior officer at the castle, if I remembered correctly.

“Thank you for your hospitality. Please contact us again if there is anything I can help with.” Hopefully this could lead to more work.

With that finished, our guests left the room, and I was now alone with Lynokis.

“Ahh, I feel truly refreshed knowing that girl won’t ever come again!” Lynokis flashed a bright, blinding smile. It was the first time I’d seen her this relaxed in a while. She’d been so serious recently. I hoped she could stay this way forever. But this wasn’t the time for me to be lounging around.

“Is it not almost time to meet up with grandfather?” I asked.

“Oh, yes it is.”

I had no work today. Instead, I would be touring the royal capital with my grandfather, whom I’d finally met yesterday. Neal would be joining us in the afternoon. My parents had some work to do in the capital, but they would be returning straight back to the Liston territories once they were done, so they wouldn’t be meeting up with us. No rest for the wicked, I suppose.

I would return home together with my grandfather tomorrow. That meant this was the last night I could have some fun in the capital.

*I wonder if they're making preparations to welcome me right this second? Maybe I should go and declare right now that I'll be going to visit them tonight so they know for certain! Okay! With that decided, I better get Lynokis off my back and see if I can find them with that symbol I took!*

Even if they were all nothing more than small fry, a hundred—or maybe more!—of them would allow me to get some enjoyment, at least.

*Man, is this gonna be one of those nights where I won't be able to rest?! Ugh, I just can't wait!*

"Ah, my apologies, Lynokis. I forgot something. Could you wait here for a moment?"

We were about to meet up with my grandfather and go on a tour of the royal capital.

"You...forgot something?"

I had come down to the hotel lobby where Lynokis was waiting to take me to my grandfather's hotel, but if I was going to act, it had to be now.

Yes, there was something I had to do: confirm that my promise with them was still in effect. But if I wanted to do that, I had to shake off Lynokis so I could move around by myself. All of this would occur swiftly out of her sight.

"What did you forget?"

Oh no, she was going to ask the specifics? I had expected her to just say, "Understood, Young Mistress. I will wait for you here," and leave it at that. Scrambling for an answer, I raised the first thing I could think of. "Um... My purse?"

"But you don't have a purse to carry. I'm the one who holds it."

So she was. Lynokis was in charge of handling my money. In fact, the only time I found myself needing to use money myself was when I wanted to buy small souvenirs on-site during *Occupation Observation*. I did have an allowance, but I couldn't tell you how much. I was completely out of touch with my personal finances. Even I was aware of how suspicious it sounded that I cared

about my purse when I was so hands-off with it usually.

“Then, um...my handkerchief?”

“I am also in possession of that.”

So she was...

It didn't help that I wasn't likely to carry my own things when going out. Lynokis was in charge of that. Even my body had been carted around by her in the wheelchair until recently.

*This is bad. I can't think of anything.*

“Young Mistress, just what are you planning?”

My sudden interest in things I had originally paid no attention to and my unnatural speechlessness was causing doubt to build on Lynokis's face. It didn't seem like anything I said here would get her to go away.

*Ugh, fine. If you won't leave me alone, I'll give you a reason to avoid me.*

“Please realize what I'm trying to say. I'm going to the restroom.”

“In that case, let me accompany you.”

“I was saying this because I didn't want you to come with me. At least let me do my business by myself.”

“What? Are you suddenly going through your rebellious phase?”

No, I just had something dangerous to do. But you know what, it would be better to just leave it as that. “Yes! This is my rebellious phase! I am of the age where I want to rebel against adults!” I declared proudly. But she now looked at me with even more suspicion in her eyes.

“That was entirely forced.” Lynokis... This woman had me rolling about on the palm of her hand. She'd completely played me. “People don't describe themselves as being in a rebellious phase. In fact, being in a rebellious phase means that you rebel against that notion in and of itself. You feel the need to rebel against everything, even if there's no reason.”

Now that she mentioned it, it *did* sound like a lie to say you yourself were in a rebellious phase. I hadn't cleared her suspicions, at all, in all kinds of meaning.

“Well, whatever you think, I’m going. It’s embarrassing, so let me go to the restroom by myself.”

“Okay. But if you take too long, I’m going to come find you.”

Tch, this girl was relentless. But I doubted I could get her to give in any further. There was no other way around it—I would simply need to hurry.

I entered the bathroom in the lobby and then escaped out through the window. The window was just a small one for ventilation and it was fairly high up the wall, but it was easy enough to slip through as a child. I climbed up the wall, latched onto the window, and maneuvered my body through.

The moment my feet landed on the ground, I dashed away.

I had no time. I had to finish my business and return before Lynokis came to check up on me.

First, I would head to the place where it had all begun, where Sharro had been stopped by the thugs. It was the kind of back alley that people would not look down—dull and inconspicuous, a dark and quiet location where a little scuffle could happen and no one would care. Perhaps because it was still morning, no one was around. It wasn’t *early* morning, but night was the time that delinquents and those of the underworld started making their moves.

I could feel myself grow frantic. As things were, Lynokis was even more frightening than an A-rank monster. If that was the case, then I would just run down any alleys I saw and search for anyone that looked like a thug. And then just as I was thinking that, I immediately found a trio who fit that exact description.

There was no time. I had to just hurry up and go.

“May I talk to you for a moment?”

“Huh?”

The trio who had been lazily walking down the alley turned around. *These guys seem kinda weak.* But they would be suitable as a source of information, at least.

I showed them what I had stolen from the thugs that day. “Could you tell me about this mark? I don’t have much time, by the way, so if you’re going to waste it, I won’t hesitate to get violent. Quickly now.”

“The hell?”

“What’s this kid on about?”

“Wait, hang on. I’ve seen this kid— Huh? Wah!”

*What did I just say?*

I threw my leg into the stomach of the guy on the left that seemed to recognize me, then used his stomach as leverage to slam my knee into his face. If he wanted to gossip about me with his friends, he could do that after I was gone.

“Wh-What in the hell are y— Gwah?!”

When I landed back on the ground, I deflected the leg of the man in the middle who was slow to react, and shoved him onto the ground.

“Guh!”

The man on the right’s reflexes were even worse. After he was struck with a spearhand that looked as if I were trying to gouge out his innards, he fell to his knees and then collapsed. He likely couldn’t speak or think through the pain.

“What do you think you’re— Whoa?!”

Before the man in the middle could stand himself back up, I thrust the symbol out in front of him. “Do you know or not? Your friends are already taking a nice little nap. Do you want to join them? I don’t intend to let you go peacefully, though.”

“What in the actual hell are you?! Who do you think we are?!”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. If you don’t hurry up and tell me what I want to know, I’ll break your arms and legs. This isn’t an empty threat.”

Perhaps sensing how serious I was being, the man’s face scrunched up as he gulped.

And with that, I managed to receive the information I wanted and was able to



get them to pass on the message that I would, in fact, be going to visit them tonight. I immediately dashed off back to the hotel.

As for if I made it back in time, well, I did. Just. I cut it *really* close. I bumped into Lynokis right as I exited the bathroom, so I was dangerously close to being caught.

And then, as we had planned, we met up with my grandfather for sightseeing around the capital. We didn't see anything especially notable, but I did hear something curious from my grandfather.

Apparently, Mrs. Rhyme had told them that Hildetaura, the third princess of Altoire, came to see our final performance and wanted to meet me. I had still yet to meet this Hildetaura, but I'd heard she was a famous magivision star...and only seven years old at that.

I had heard that child actors on magivision were rare, but her appearances weren't seen as that of a child actor, only the duty of royalty. She wasn't treated as a child but as a princess.

I had no idea why a *princess* would have any interest in me, let alone why she would want to meet me. It may be nice to meet her through magivision work, though.

We met up with Neal and Lynette in the afternoon, toured the shipyard and the royal capital's own broadcasting station, and finished off with a meal before returning to the hotel.

I was scheduled to leave the royal capital with my grandfather tomorrow morning. Our packing and preparations were finished this morning—and that meant it was time for me to have fun.

Late into the night, I sneaked out of the hotel.

"Wow, you really came."

Sharro was already waiting for me out front. Honestly, I wished she hadn't come, but here she was. What did she think was so fun about coming with me to something like this?

Time was limited. We ran as fast as we could to the designated location.

Even at this time, the streetlights were dazzlingly bright, and the light still coming from the buildings meant the main street was well lit. But the moment you turned down into an alleyway, the atmosphere turned dark and gloomy.

“Did you not know about those thugs, Sharro?”

“Them? If I recall correctly, I think they were a group called the Zigzag Dogs or something, right? I only knew of their name.”

That was it, the Zigzag Dogs. The Zigzag Dogs, true to their name, were nothing more than dogs with one foot in the underworld. They would likely be no more by the end of the night. There seemed to be other gangs lurking in the capital, but I had a complete lack of interest in them.

Why? Because the only thing in my mind was that today, this evening, *finally*, I would get to play with these dogs. Given how quickly I was able to get info on them, they were probably pretty famous around these parts. Or should I say *infamous*.

In other words, I had no reason to feel any guilt for what I was about to do.

The farther we got from the main street, the more the polished royal capital began to show its dirty side. Wherever you looked, there were dangerous-looking groups loitering around and drinking.

“Hey— Guh!”

“You— Ow!”

“You brat— Shit, that hurt!”

Every time they would try to cause an issue with us, I would immediately shut them up. This in itself was pretty fun, but it actually felt bad to do, so it was something I preferred to avoid. I had no doubt there were those who were genuinely worried seeing us here; they were just rough about it.

I was a five-year-old child, after all. And I had a girl with me. Some very clearly had no bad intentions when they approached us. In hindsight, most would look at us and see a girl bringing along a child, not the other way around. We were a combo where I very much did not look the leader.

“You’re really strong, Nia. Even up close I have no idea what’s happening.”

“It’s a secret technique passed down through the Liston family. Don’t tell anyone, or it won’t be secret anymore.”

“Gotcha.”

“I want actual combat experience, so that’s why I’m doing this.”

“Hmm, I see.” Sharro didn’t seem to understand nor did she particularly have any interest in my motives, but that was fine. It wasn’t something I could explain in words very well.

After a little while of walking down the path asking the way and taking down about ten more people, we found a shop. The sign in front no doubt used to have an actual business name on it, but it had been painted over with “Zigzag Dogs.” It was a large, run-down bar, likely their gathering place—their turf, even.

*Hm? I barely sense anyone around. Did they not prepare to welcome me after all?*

“Sharro, this is as far as I’m willing to bring you.”

“Okay. I’ll be watching from that roof over there,” she said, pointing towards the ruined building opposite the bar. I couldn’t sense anyone inside it, so she would probably be safe there. It wouldn’t take long for me to deal with such small fry either. “Be careful, Nia.”

*Yes, I will. Really, you should be saying that to the mutts that are about to face me.*

If I had sensed a lot of people inside, I would’ve entered through the window or a back entrance in case of a trap. Or I would just break the wall in. But it seemed pretty empty, so I boldly went in through the front door.

The desolate bar interior was a complete mess, chairs and tables broken to pieces or thrown all over the ground. I’d made the assumption from how it looked outside, but they weren’t doing proper business here.

“Oh, you really came.”

Right in front of me, as I entered the dim bar, was a man wearing a suit,

nonchalantly sitting on one of the only chairs to make it out alive. Around him were three unconscious men.

So...what was going on here exactly?

“Care to explain the situation?” I asked. “I came here because I had no choice but to play along with these men in their revenge.”

I would be unfairly surrounded by numbers upon numbers of their men holding a grudge against me when I’d only taught them a tiny little lesson. That would then make me someone who just happened to be jumped by a gang wanting revenge. I would simply be a victim, one who was unwittingly involved in a fight, one who chose to step up and face their wish for revenge head-on. I had tried so hard to set it up so that this would be self-defense even if I accidentally killed a few of them...

And I was so excited for it too! I had so been looking forward to finally fighting someone that was at least a little strong! You couldn’t overdo it in a one-on-one fight just because of impulse, or opportunity, or a whim, or enthusiasm, or any other reason!

“Can’t you see?” the suited man lazily asked as he put a cigarette between his lips and lit it. “We don’t need trash under us that would even get beaten up by a kid.”

Well, that wording was certainly telling.

“Are you the actual mafia?”

“Mmm, not too far off the mark.”

And that meant those dogs had been lackeys of the mafia like I’d thought.

“But this changes things a little. You’re strong, ain’tcha? Maybe it wasn’t so far-fetched for them to get beat up by you, after all.” The suited man stood up and kicked one of the thugs lying on the ground. “Count your lucky stars, lads. If that little girl over there hadn’t arrived in time, you’d be kissin’ your lives goodbye. Off you go.”

The men lying on the ground, likely beat up by that suited man, dragged their no doubt aching bodies out the back entrance.

“So? What’re you gonna do about this mess, huh?” the suited man asked once we were alone.

“What sort of answer are you looking for?”

“I mean, you beat up our men and all. Situation was so dire I had to come all the way out here myself. Truth be told, I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about small fry like them, but the second you let people think you’re weak down this neck of the woods, it’s over. And, uhhhh, right about now, you’re thinkin’ we’re weak, no? Thinkin’ we’re all as limp as a wet noodle.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“You want me to take responsibility. Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Gold star for you, miss. You got some brains in there. Guessing you didn’t come here by yourself for no reason then.”

Take responsibility. Take responsibility, hm?

“I would say that’s my line.” He pissed me off. *Really* pissed me off. He wanted *me* to take responsibility?

I came here ready and waiting to have fun beating up at least a hundred people, and yet when I opened the door, this was all I saw. Did he have any idea just how disappointed I felt? What an asshole.

How was he gonna make it up to me, huh? My fists were thirsting for blood. How was he gonna fill my heart, begging to be satiated with violence? I had been looking forward to this so damn much!

“I am simply resolving a fight that I was involved in, nothing more, nothing less. You want me to take responsibility? That is precisely why I am here. If you hadn’t gotten yourself involved like this, it would have ended there.”

And yet, for some reason, the boss of these little mongrels had decided to barge in and get in my way. And by sending someone so weak!

“Pay up what they owed me right this second,” I growled. “I’m going to beat you to an absolute pulp. I won’t forgive you until you’re begging for your life in tears.”

“Huh, that so? I was thinking I’d let you go after giving you a bit of a fright, but

if that's the case..."

Noticing me ready a fighting stance, the suited man flicked away his cigarette and began walking towards me.

He was surprisingly young. Or, no, maybe not surprisingly. He wasn't tall nor was he blessed with a large physique. He was very slender. His expression looked unmotivated on the surface, but his dark brown eyes alone shimmered with a different story—a thirst for violence, maybe, or a strong hostility.

"I'll kill you." The loose, relaxed body of the man suddenly twisted.

He was fast.

The movements produced by the exaggerated fluctuation of speed and the shift of his laxness into violence resulted in a level of agility that well exceeded what I had imagined.

His first move, a punch from his right fist, gouged right into my face.



*Brilliant.*

Absolutely no hesitation right from the first move. Amazing. This was wonderful. A battle with one hundred small fry would no doubt have been more fun, but I would make do with this for now.

I had been punched about ten times by now. There was no hesitation, no mercy, just swift punches aimed right at my face.

*This is truly wonderful. I can't get enough.*

It hurt, more than I expected, and I would probably be left with some bruises afterwards. But if I thought of this as a weakling's all-out retaliation, I found it quite endearing.

A smile slipped onto my face as I took ten more blows to the head. The suited man pulled back and frowned.

"Why the hell are you *smiling*?"

"Hm? Perhaps because your punches tickle?" They really did kind of hurt, honestly, but if you compared it to an actual fight to the death, it was nothing. There was no point in dodging. They hurt even less than mosquito bites.

"You're crazy. Even I'm feeling it in my fists. I'm not holding back at all. In fact, each time I punch you, I'm trying to make you go flying, but you're still standing. What is going on here?"

Well, of course I wouldn't go flying.

"Isn't the answer obvious? It's because you're weak. And I'm not just referring to your inability to punch a child off their feet."

"Huh?"

"I believe that it is the duty of the strong to feel the full strength of the weak and then beat them to a pulp. If you show them that there is in fact another level of strength to obtain, it gives reason to their defeat, don't you think? It lets them see exactly why they lost."

Once he had that reason, he could use it to get stronger and stronger. *Make*



*me your goal. Make me your reason for your hunger for power.* Whether he could ever hope to beat me was a different matter.

“You’ve got some nerve, don’t you?” The suited man had worn an expression of laziness only a moment before, but now, it was hard to mistake that smile on his face as anything other than hostility, malice, and a desire to harm. Good, it seemed he’d finally found his spark.

*Yes, I want you to come at me with everything you have. Get it all out of your system right here. Every little bit. You’re weak, anyway.* And only then would I beat him up. That was the duty of the strong, after all.

“I’ll really kill you, you know,” he said, swinging his right hand out—suddenly holding a metal rod.

“Huh? What’s this about?” I asked without thinking.

*Where’d he pull that from?* Was it some magic trick? A hidden weapon like an assassin? No, I was pretty sure he hadn’t been hiding a rod of that length on his person. In fact, it would be pretty much impossible to. It didn’t look like the kind of weapon that could fold up either.

“Eat shit, you brat!”

Ignoring my question however, he suddenly swung the rod down with all his strength, spirit and rage suddenly all the more apparent.

*Thwack!*

It was just a metal rod; I would have been fine taking the blow given the wielder, but since I had no idea what that weapon really was, I took the blow with my right arm. I observed the weapon without a second thought and was able to confirm that it was likely nothing more than your average steel rod.

Hmm... If it had been one of the infamous demon blades, or a manasword, or any kind of weapon enhanced with magic, I could see it being possible to suddenly summon it. But this rod really was just a regular metal rod.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The man cried out and mercilessly kept swinging the rod down on me. I could sense insanity in that lack of mercy, as he kept putting his whole body weight

into his strikes.

I simply kept blocking without a care. I probably could've let him hit me directly, but getting hit with something that solid would likely result in me bleeding, so I wanted to avoid it. At the end of the day, I was an aristocrat's daughter, and I didn't want to dirty my clothes. It would have been terrible if Lynokis were to find me out too.

After about fifty-four strikes, the man came to a stop. As he'd gone all out solely on madness and impulse, his shoulders were heaving with every breath, and he was looking down at me in a daze.

And then finally, he whispered, "Hey, am I...weak?"

Huh? He was gonna ask me?

"I wonder if you might be. If I'm honest, I'm not terribly sure."

I had a feeling that this man had almost definitely been the kind to get by with bragging about his fights. There was no doubt that going all out as he did here and dealing basically no damage to someone like myself had done a great number to his pride.

This was the feeling of despair that those who believed they were strong would often feel. I didn't have any memories of it, but I was sure I had (probably) experienced it myself many times. It's likely that I made others experience it too, if I understood correctly.

"Am I just exceptionally strong, or am I strong and you're also weak? I don't know which it is. Whatever the answer, there is one thing for certain: I am strong. You shouldn't feel ashamed about losing to me, personally," I said, rubbing my right arm. It was the arm that had taken the brunt of the rod's assault. There was a bit of a bruise forming there, but it was so minor it would likely be gone by the following evening.

One other thing was certain: this man was far too weak for me. I wasn't sure if he was weak generally speaking, though. I would end up winning against him with the same amount of energy you spend when you wonder over whether or not to peel your apple skin in the shape of a rabbit. That was all his strength

was worth.

“May I have a turn now?” Now that he had gotten it all out of his system, it was my turn. “Consider this a nice training opportunity. Come at me again.”

I would be leaving the capital tomorrow. This would be my last chance to get into a fight. I had come here expecting to fight a hundred men, and instead, I was left with disappointment.

*If I don't get my fun in here, I'll be so wound up I won't be able to sleep.*

I dodged his wild swings over and over and slapped his face silly again and again. Of course, I made sure to pull my punches. If I hit him too hard, he'd die on the spot. He'd outright explode, in fact.

After about thirty-eight blows, his spirit broke.

“Just kill me already...”

The man fell to his knees as his heart cracked in two, the steel rod dropping from his limp hand. He had finally detected the difference in our strength and had given up. Good.

“I was honestly starting to wonder what I would do if you didn't know when to give in.”

Managing thirty-eight blows in total wasn't bad at all. I'd say he tried his best. I had been doing nothing more than playing with him, but I was sure this would become motivation for him to get stronger—motivation that might bring him beyond even me, in fact. I would be overjoyed if that truly happened.

“I'd like to go home now. Is that all right with you?” I asked.

“Don't think this'll all end here.”

What was he going on about now?

Oh wait, of course.

“You're a member of the mafia, aren't you? Then next time, I'll come out to meet you. I don't live in the royal capital, and I'll be returning home tomorrow. I will no doubt be back to visit, so let's meet again then, all right? Let's see... I'll

come visit this bar the next time I'm in the area."

From the hesitant look on his bruised, puffed-up face as he silently watched me, he had no idea how to take my words.

"That's a promise. You've chased away those dogs by now, so you may as well set up shop here. Run it as the bar it's meant to be or something. One day I'll come again; I promise you that. Make sure to prepare a suitable welcome for me by then." I made the suggestion on a whim, but perhaps it wasn't such a terrible idea. If this bar became one of the few places for me to find sparring partners, it would be the best. I would love it if he turned this run-down bar into that.

"You've got some screws loose, kid."

Couldn't deny that one.

"Oh, right. How did you make that appear?" I asked.

Normally, a martial artist, upon victory, should show respect to the loser's martial arts, and, if they had nothing else they were there for, proceed to swiftly leave the area. The suited man's spirit was completely broken, and it was because of me to boot. The winner had already been decided. I did not intend to take this any further. As such, I wanted to leave right away, but I wanted to confirm this first.

"That'?" The mobster asked.

I pointed at the steel rod on the ground at his confusion.

"Oh, the metal rod. It's just an attuned weapon. That's not so rare, is it?"

Well, this was a new word to add to my dictionary. "I wouldn't know. Does it function like magic? Is it common?"

"There's not a lot of people who can pull it off, but the phenomenon itself is well-known. I guess you are a kid. Would make sense that you're not familiar."

I wasn't sure if you could actually call me a child, but better to not complicate things. "Am I right in understanding that it allows you to draw the weapon from elsewhere instantaneously?"

"Pretty much."

Hmm.

“What a fun little tool.” With that said, I turned around to leave. My curiosity was sated, so it was about time for me to go. “I’ll be leaving now. Let’s meet again.”

“Yeah. You make sure you come back here. Don’t think this is the end, cause it ain’t.” Though his face was battered and bruised, his eyes were filled with intent to kill, and that murderous intent was so pure and untainted. It gave me chills in all the best ways.

I really did feel the makings of someone strong in him. It was impressive how little he had held back against a perceived child—it showed he didn’t judge a book by its cover. All he needed now was to improve his skill so we could have a real fight to the death. Only if he managed to improve, though. It was a shame. He just needed to be a little stronger.

Oh...

“Hey.”

“Huh? Grngh?!”

I kicked him right in the gut from where he was kneeled on the ground and made sure to take him down for real.

“What the...? You little...!”

Wow, not bad. I’d kicked him with all intent of knocking him out, and yet he was still conscious. No other choice then.

“You’d be best not leaving this bar for a while.”

If he got involved as beat up as he was now, he’d never make it out alive. I made sure to warn him from where he was, unable to move from the pain and frustration, and then headed to partake in the main dish that was so politely laying itself out in front of me.

“Good evening.”

“Holy— You gave me the fright of my life!”

The sudden greeting from behind her made Sharro White nearly jump out of her skin. She had come along with Nia Liston out of worry for this pure white girl who mysteriously loved getting into danger.

As Sharro watched that girl resolutely head off for the abandoned bar, and having seen how much of a good mood the girl had been in on the way here, Sharro realized that perhaps she had nothing to worry about, after all.

Nia was probably as ridiculously strong as she stated. Seriously.

After confirming that Nia had entered the bar, she had turned to head up the stairs of the abandoned building across the street. But then suddenly, someone had spoken up from behind her.

When she turned around, Nia's maid—or whatever she was—stood there in her work attire. Her name was Lynokis, Sharro believed. They hadn't interacted very much, though she'd seen her numerous times during rehearsals for the stage play. "Oh, Ms. Maid."

"I am her personal attendant, not her maid."

Naturally, Sharro was aware that Lynokis disliked her. She wouldn't gain anything by worrying about it, though, so she simply chose not to.

"Um... Were you following Nia?"

"Yes. I am in charge of not just the young mistress's daily needs but also her safety. I cannot let her out of my sight." Nia was quite truly the young lady of a rich household, so of course she would have a personal attendant and bodyguard. "You intend to keep an eye on her from up there, yes? Then let us be off."

"Huh?" Though confused, Sharro chased after Lynokis as she walked past her. "You're not going to stop her?"

"I have no reason to do such a thing."

"Are you serious? Isn't wanting to keep her out of danger reason enough?"

"That person is much stronger than I am. I can't stop her now that she's reached this stage."

In any other case, that may have been a shocking revelation. But not here.

Though she hadn't been a hundred percent sure, Sharro had already begun suspecting that Nia was unusually powerful, so the statement didn't particularly linger for her.

*That girl really is too strong.*

Sharro may have been a complete amateur in the field of battle—so much so it wasn't even worth considering if she was strong or weak—but even she could tell. If someone told her that Nia was even stronger than she imagined, she wouldn't doubt it for a second.

"I can't find it in me to try to stop her when she has such a joyous look on her face either."

"I guess so."

Honestly, Sharro wasn't entirely sure what to take from the thought of someone finding the idea of violence and running into danger fun, but regardless, the actress and the attendant chatted away as they made their way up the building. It was fairly small at only around three floors, but it allowed them to look down on the bar from a higher vantage point.

"The moment the young mistress has finished what she's here to do, I will return to the hotel. Don't let her know that I was here, please."

"Are you sure you can't even warn her or something?"

"I very much wish to do so, but it would be troublesome for me if next time she became craftier and was able to completely conceal her presence in a way I would be unable to track. I am content with simply keeping an eye on her for now."

"Whew, being an attendant is tough, huh."

"It certainly is."

"Hm? Is that...?"

In the middle of their conversation, they spotted someone walking down on the road below them. It was so dark they couldn't see the figure properly, but it was definitely a person.

One or two more people made their way to the front of the bar...and then

they stopped. Sharro thought it may have been a coincidence, but then a whole other crew of people arrived, as well.

At first, there were a bit more than ten gathered, but that number only kept growing.

“Hey, uh, is this not getting a bit dangerous?”

You would think that with so many people gathered, the area would only get louder, but instead, it was eerily quiet. Something was off. What was worse, some were definitely armed. It looked as if they were about to raid the bar.

The tension in the air only grew as the number of people gathered became unbefitting of such a quiet night. By this point, there was no doubt what was occurring here. These men were standing in front of that bar for a reason. There was no way it was a coincidence.

Sharro had no idea what exactly their goal was, but right now, Nia was inside that bar. Which meant it was most likely...

“I cannot help but feel pity for them,” the attendant quietly muttered as she looked down at that ominous group that now numbered over thirty. “Not even one hundred simple thugs could take down the young mistress.”

“What? Is she *that* strong?”

Perhaps because she was an amateur, Sharro couldn’t believe Lynokis’s words. But regardless, the truth of the matter would soon become apparent.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Did you have to wait long?”

After leaving the suited man immobilized, I exited the bar. As I had detected, a little over thirty armed thugs were standing outside waiting for me.

*Ahhh, incredible!*

The quality left a lot to be desired, but the quantity was decent, and honestly, that bout with the suited man hadn’t been enough, after all. I was overjoyed that the main dish had come along after the appetizer.

“Oi, you little brat. Where’s Anzel?” the man who appeared to be the leader of his little ragtag group asked.



Anzel must have been the name of that man I had left sprawled out on the ground inside the bar.

“Why do you care about him? I’m standing right here.”

I didn’t care who these men were nor did I care what their relationship with Anzel was, but given they asked about him, it sounded as if he was their target.

“H-Hey, this girl’s the one! She’s the pale kid who’s stupid strong! No way... You don’t think she killed Anzel, do you?!”

Oh my, perhaps I was a target, after all. Were they related to the dogs? Were they here for revenge?

Did the reason even matter?

Between their bloodthirsty aura and the weapons they held, even an idiot could tell they definitely weren’t here for a simple chat. If they were here intending to take down the weakened Anzel, then as the victor of that duel with him, it would be fine for me to defend him for now—this was also a form of respect towards martial arts. If you were going to take someone down, only do it when they were at their best. I wouldn’t have bothered stopping these men otherwise.

“Are you done talking? Let’s hurry up and start.”

*Thwomp!*

Right after I said that, the boss was hurtling through the air.

Why? Because I had stepped forward as fast as this body could, and punched him just a little harder than usual. I wasn’t terribly satisfied with small fry who didn’t even have the reflexes to react to such a simple move... Or, hm. Maybe it was actually quite fun? Huh? This was more fun than I expected.

“AH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA! C’mon, c’mon! If you don’t hurry up and finish me, you’re all going down first!” The laughter bubbled up inside me. This air of violence that my spirit had been deprived of for so long left me with an unending happiness. Fists that one can swing without any guilt felt as wonderful as I thought they would.

Nehilga was a small-time thug that was fairly well-known.

As peaceful as Altoire may have been on the surface, even it held an underbelly. Hiding away deep within the breeding grounds for such types, the eastern area of the warehouse district, he had slowly but surely built up his name.

Nehilga himself was aware that he was but a small-time thug. But that was only because he was biding his time, waiting for the perfect opportunity. The time and patience he put into making his next move were what made him look like some petty little gangster.

If he saw something that would gain him great profit, he would strike with no hesitation. He would engage with the target and completely ravage them. He would crush the weak, devour the strong, and indulge on the gains.

That was how he had handled himself up to this point. He had believed in his instinct for opportunity and his ability to manage risk. As a result, he had even managed to get as far as running a hideout in the district.

Here, however, there was no other way to put it: he had misjudged from the start.

“Wh-What the hell’s going on here...?”

Nehilga had arrived at the scene, a sweetheart on each arm and four of his familiar trusted lackeys trailing behind. Believing that this would be a simple job that would net him a pile of cash, he’d been in quite the good mood.

However, the scene that greeted him was not what he had been expecting in the slightest.

In a corner of a back road filled with abandoned buildings, a whole bunch of the “tough” kids that he’d gotten sick of seeing were piled up on the ground. He felt like he recognized some of the faces.

Some irregularity had disrupted Nehilga’s plans.

He had come here to retrieve the daughter of a class-four aristocrat, Nia Liston. She was a kid that was the key to his fortune. The moment Nehilga had heard that one of the younger gangs had gotten into a scuffle with her, he had

made the bet that big money was right in front of him.

His plan had been very simple: the daughter of an aristocrat had gotten too big for her britches and decided to cause trouble with his men, ultimately leading to her getting hit with payback for her arrogance, and as such, they would demand compensation from the Liston family. It was an exceedingly simple plan.

So that he would have even more victims to point at, Nehilga had asked his bodyguard Anzel to crush the rest of the younger gangs. All so they could frame Nia Liston. All so they could point at a fault of the aristocrats and tell them what a horrible thing their daughter had done.

The higher the class of aristocrat, the more they hated this kind of scandal. Admittedly, in this day and age, where the class divide between aristocrats and commoners was slowly narrowing, Nehilga wasn't sure just how much one or two scandals could really affect their standing. But aristocrats nowadays did everything they could to not damage their reputation amongst the common people, which meant they had become rather sensitive to this type of thing.

Regardless, the moment he managed to get his mitts on that little girl, it would all be decided. It would cause a scandal if the family didn't try to get their kidnapped daughter back, but they would also have to be careful that news of what she had done didn't spread. He'd increased the number of victims to pin on her already, so it was highly likely it would escalate to a much greater incident if word got out.

It was important for him to establish the groundwork to make it look like they were preventing Nia Liston from causing any more harm. In reality, it was kidnapping and imprisonment, but the key difference was how it looked from the outside.

It was a simple bit of work that would give great rewards, suitable for a small-time thug.

At least, that was what Nehilga believed, and it had been what he was working towards in secret these past few days. From his understanding of the situation, the plan had succeeded.

“Oh my, am I allowed seconds?”

The problem was that Anzel had lost to Nia Liston.

Amongst the sprawled-out bodies was that small girl with white hair. She was only about five or six years old.

It was a surreal sight: a young girl casually standing in an abandoned, moonlit back alley that was littered with bodies, flashing a small smile. Her unusual white hair standing out in the dark only added to the otherworldly figure before them.

The boys lying about were the ones that Nehilga had ordered Anzel to beat up. Clueless about the truth of the situation, their grudge for Anzel had simply reached a point where they had gathered to take him down.

And then they were taken down by Nia Liston instead.

However, Nehilga wasn't aware of any of this, having just arrived. He didn't know that Anzel had already lost, and he had no way to know that everyone beat up here had been defeated by Nia Liston. He had no understanding of the circumstances, but what he did know was that the kid he could trade in for a pile of cash was standing right in front of him.

"Damn, you're really here. Hey, little lady, you're Nia Liston, yeah?" That was all that mattered to Nehilga. Even if there was a slight change in the plans, it didn't change that he just had to secure her and his job was done.

"You know who I am?"

"Of course. I watch magivision sometimes."

Nia Liston was famous. To someone with access to magivision, she was a face that they might see every day. But that was precisely why she had value. Because she had value, she was worth money.

"Ah, are you a fan? I didn't expect to bump into one here."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a big fan of yours. So could you come with us for juuuust a little bit? We wanna ask you about some stuff." Nehilga himself knew how blatant the lie was, but he didn't particularly like being violent with children. If she behaved, then it would save them all the hassle.

"Unfortunately, I was never advised to go to some stranger's house in the

middle of the night. So no thank you.”

It was a straightforward answer. Absolutely nothing strange about it. At least, if the circumstances weren’t as they were.

“C’mon, don’t be a spoilsport. By the way, what happened to Anzel? Did you not bump into him?”

“Anzel? Were you the one that ordered him?”

“If you know him, that means you met him, yeah?”

But that then raised the question again as to why she was here. What happened to Anzel?

“He’s having a little nap in that bar there.”

“He’s what...?”

Anzel was where that little hand was pointing, apparently.

No, more importantly, what had happened to *Anzel*? His name was known far and wide in the underworld as a highly capable bodyguard. He was rumored to be so strong that he could never lose in a one-on-one fight. Given Nehilga wanted to one day invite Anzel to join his family completely rather than remaining an outside hire, he had paid a lot of money to keep him by his side.

There had been another woman that he wanted to invite to his family, but she had gone off somewhere a while ago. That didn’t matter for now.

“If you’re going to send an assassin my way, at least make it someone strong.”

Nehilga may have been an idiot, but his mind worked quickly. He was quite cunning, in fact. And judging from those words, Anzel had been beaten by Nia Liston.

Now that they had reached this point, Nehilga had finally realized just what he was being confronted with.

Anzel left unconscious in the bar, the brats all sprawled out on the ground, the reason that the gang had gotten into a scuffle with Nia Liston in the first place, what exactly happened—taking all this into account, Nehilga was starting to see this little girl who was standing unbothered in this place, under these

circumstances, as the unnatural being she was.

Just as Nehilga could feel his heart take one step back in retreat, his men, his friends, his bodyguards, his colleagues turned to him and said, “Boss, whaddya want us to do?”

“I don’t get your big brain plan, but you want to catch her, right?”

In the underworld, any signs of weakness would be called out. And the moment you stumbled, the fall was instant. There was no stopping that descent. Just one mistake could make everything you had built up come tumbling down. Those comrades you believed in would turn their back on you and rip your power out of your hands. That was how Nehilga had taken down every other thug up to this point.

If he chose to run away from a girl who wasn’t even a teenager, that stain would be left on him for life.

Nehilga *couldn’t* run.

From the moment he had decided to capture Nia Liston, from the moment they had met here like this, from the moment he had devised the plan, he had already made a high-risk high-reward gamble. He couldn’t back out now.

If he did, he would lose everything.

“All right, capture that kid.”

There was suddenly a cold sweat crawling down his back. His instincts were screaming danger at him, but he ignored them and made his order.

Capture Nia Liston.

“Okay, little lady, come along with us nice and— Ah.”

One of his men approached Nia Liston with a sneer on his face...and then crumpled to the ground.

No one knew what had happened.

Nia Liston didn’t look as if she had moved. Next thing they knew, she was looking down at their fallen comrade, a bored look on her face.

“Oi, what’re you playing at? You’ve been drinking too much again, haven’t y—

Ah.”

When the second person approached, unaware of why the first had suddenly collapsed, he crumpled in just the same way.

What was going on here? It didn’t look as if Nia Liston was doing anything, and it didn’t look as if his men were being taken down by an outside force either.

But everyone present now realized one thing. This was unnatural. Something unnatural was happening right here, right now. And the root of that surreality being Nia Liston, a five-year-old girl, was unthinkable.

Except to Nehilga, who had vaguely started to catch on...

“Hey.”

Before he knew it, Nia Liston was suddenly right in front of him.

He hadn’t even averted his gaze. She was just...there...as if she had teleported.

That was the moment that Nehilga’s eyes adjusted to the dark of the back alley, when he realized that this whole time, he hadn’t been seeing the true extent of the carnage. He could see no end to the bodies.

There were so many.

There weren’t just twenty or thirty of them either. Even more bodies were piled up in heaps on the ground. Surely there couldn’t be over one hundred of them?

No, he couldn’t say for sure. Because he couldn’t see an end to the piles of people.

Nehilga hadn’t wanted to know this. Wasn’t it likely that they had all been beaten the same way his men had just been, completely unaware of what had happened? Then the one who did it had to be...

“You wanna go? Or not?”

Was she serious?

“It’s a pleasant night tonight. I’m in a good mood, so I don’t mind letting you

go. What would you like to do?”

He definitely wanted her to let him go.

He almost said those words, but he definitely couldn't say that in front of his men.

“Ah.”

That voice came from behind him.

When he turned around, for some reason, there was Nia Liston. This child that should have been standing in front of him...was now standing behind him. And two more of his men were now slowly crumbling to the ground.

“Now, now, running away is just rude.”

He didn't understand.

He didn't understand anything.

But if there was one thing he did understand, it was that right now, he had bumped into some...*thing* that he shouldn't have.

A chill ran up his back.

His body was trembling violently.

He was able to see those unconscious kids farther away now, but still there was no end in sight. Just how many people had been taken down? Fifty? Had the number actually crossed a hundred? He didn't want to know. He definitely did not want to know.

Were his ladies trembling, or was it Nehilga himself?

“Hey.”

Nia Liston smiled.

“I'm counting on you to keep their lips shut. As much as you can. Tell them they need to keep it a secret that I was here tonight. You can do that, can't you? Or can you not?”

Nehilga had already decided his answer.



After that night, several thugs disappeared from the royal capital. It appeared they had experienced something frightful, simply stating “White-haired kid that night was way too scary!” before they vanished.

No one knew of their whereabouts after that.

A few years later, there was a small rumor that a gilded man who had been living in the eastern side of the warehouse district had taken up farmwork out in the countryside.

But even that rumor dissipated within a few days.

# Epilogue

“You’re in an awfully good mood today.”

It appeared I was doing a terrible job of hiding how refreshed I now felt. How relieved I was having finally been able to release my pent-up anger.

“We managed to finish such a depressing stage play without incident, and now I get to go home. Of course I’d be happy.”

I was casually chatting with Lynokis while we sat around in the hotel lobby. My preparations to return home had been completed the day before. My luggage was packed, so we were just waiting for my grandfather to arrive, and then we would board the flight back together.

We had already bought souvenirs for the servants of the house, so I didn’t think there was anything left to get. Incidentally, said souvenirs were baked sweets from a famous sweets shop.

The performance of *The Girl Who Fell in Love* by the Ice Rose Theater Company had been greatly successful, so it wasn’t a lie to say I was relieved about that.

But of course, the real reason for my current mood was the events of the previous night. I finally got to let my power run free—it truly did feel like a dream.

I wouldn’t deny that most of my enemies had been weak little runts, but I had been craving violence to such a degree that I enjoyed myself way more than I had ever imagined I would. Naturally, I made sure to savor every last enemy, catching anyone who tried to escape and giving every person present a thorough pummeling. I didn’t kill them, of course. It wasn’t as if I had forgotten how to show restraint.

Fifty of them had showed up by the end, but not a single one of them was more than a small fry. It was a shame, really, but this was enough to satisfy me for now.

After beating all of them to a pulp, I walked Sharro home and then returned to my hotel as if nothing had happened.

Were I to be greedy, I would actually wish that they had all been elites at least fifty to eighty percent as strong as me. I wanted that feeling of a real battle, blood boiling, meat dancing, bones breaking, *my* bones being broken. If an enemy that would actually endanger me was too much to ask for, then the world could at least give me someone who would put up a good fight.

I was aware this was all an unreasonable desire, though.

“Your grandfather has arrived, Young Mistress,” Lynokis informed me. I stood up from the sofa.

My grandfather insisted that I stay over at his estate for the night when we dropped him off, but after skillfully avoiding his request, Lynokis and I returned to the Liston estate shortly after evening.

Truthfully, I wouldn't have minded, but I had to consider my recording schedule that couldn't really be adjusted on the spot. I didn't think I would be allowed to stay over with how packed my days were. The only way would be if I sneaked out in the middle of the night. Just like the previous night!

When we finally made it home, my parents were yet to return home from work, but the servants of the house were waiting, ready to welcome us home, and so my trip ended safely. Home really was the place I felt most at ease.

Honestly, the employees seemed more excited for the sweets I had brought back than for me... It wasn't something for me to mind, though. There was nothing wrong about them being excited for souvenirs.

I got myself washed up in the bath, ate dinner at the table alone, and then returned to my room.

“Whew.”

All tension left my body.

I may not have been Nia, but even to me, her room was the space I could most easily relax in. This may already have become the place where I felt I

belonged.

“Tea, Young Mistress?”

“Yes, please.”

Lynokis served me the beverage while I changed into my nightwear.

The tea being prepared was the same as the tea I had drunk at the Chocolate Lily’s Aroma, the restaurant in the capital. It had a very strong smell distinctive of an expensive luxury item, but my grandfather had bought it for me anyway.

“A whole year has passed already,” Lynokis suddenly said.

Hm?

“A year since what?”

“Since that night you nearly died. Ever since that night, you went right on the road to recovery.”

Ah... She was right.

It had finally been a whole year since I had become Nia. I had been so focused on not dying back then that I wasn’t so aware of the time of year, but I believed it had been spring. The time since then somehow felt both long and short.

A year had passed since that suspicious man had inserted my soul into the already-passed Nia’s body. I had spent over half a year fighting off the disease, and since the winter, I had ventured into the world of magivision, something I hadn’t even experienced in my past life.

Even my visit to the royal capital had been for the good of that unfamiliar culture. And that likely would not be the last time.

“Young Mistress Nia, I have a request.”

“You have a request for *me*? Ah, you want to sleep in the same bed, yes?”

“Well, of course I do! How come a girl you’d only known for a day got to sleep in the same bed as you, and yet I’ve known you for over a year and that still isn’t enough?! I don’t understand the logic!”

I had never seen Lynokis so vocally obsessive about doing something with me before.

“I would rather avoid doing it with you. You seem like someone who would ignore restraint and kiss me in my sleep or something.”

What I had felt from Sharro felt like simple platonic affection, but I felt something more from Lynokis. How should I put this? It was like all my survival instincts were warning me that I shouldn't let my guard down around her, that she wasn't someone I should actually be keeping so close around me.

“What's the problem?! We're two girls getting close like two girls should be allowed to do! And we're both girls! It shouldn't even matter what happens!”

The more she pushed it, the less the argument of us both being girls felt like it held any weight. Okay, nope, I definitely wouldn't let her sleep in the same bed as me.

“Ah, wait, no. That wasn't my request,” she said.

Apparently, I had gotten ahead of myself with my assumption.

“Young Mistress, would you be willing to train me?”

I eyed her with suspicion for a moment. “Train you in what way?”

“In combat. I have no right to proclaim myself as your bodyguard if I remain this much weaker than you.”

Well, this was a pleasant surprise.

I had been showing her my forms every day, so I imagined she had been getting an idea of how strong I was, but she may quite accurately have a grasp of our difference in strength. In which case, Lynokis may be stronger than I gave her credit for initially; being able to understand your opponent's strength was also a sign of your own strength.

“Are you sure? I won't go soft on you.”

“All the better. If nothing changes, I do not believe I can keep up with you.”

Keep up with me? I...wouldn't ask exactly what she meant by that. I felt like if I wasn't tactful, I risked a snake darting out.

“If you're prepared, then that's fine. Let us start tomorrow.”

This arrangement suited me, as well. Lynokis was still weak, but she was

stronger than your average thug. I was happy to get to spar with her too. It would be so boring I had no doubt I would be left yawning, though. Having to make sure I didn't go so far I broke her would pose a bit of an issue, but I would simply do my best to be careful.

"In that case, Lynokis, you are now my first apprentice. Become strong enough that you don't become an embarrassment to me."

"I will put in my all."

My daily life became even more hectic when my personal attendant became my apprentice. Not only did I have to keep up the recordings for *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation*, I would also occasionally receive further job offers to appear in stage plays. Said offers weren't from the capital but rather from the Liston territories instead, so it was possible for me to do other recordings in any spare time I had between rehearsals.

I was also invited to social functions held by Mrs. Rhyme, and I attended other social functions with my parents, making my visits to the royal capital much more frequent.

Of course, I made sure not to forget a single day of my martial arts training. It was something I had to make sure I did regardless of how busy I was, so there were many days it cut into my sleep time.

Another notable change was that a new magivision channel had been created. The only broadcasting stations up to this point had been the one in the Royal Capital of Altoire and the one in the Liston territories, but now, there was a third.

Vikson Silver, an aristocrat of the fifth class, had entered the magivision industry and founded a broadcasting company within his own Silver territories. As it was a momentous occasion, we visited for an episode of *Occupation Observation*.

"Thank you for visiting."

The only ones being recorded for this were myself, Vikson Silver as the chairman of the organization, and staff of his broadcasting station, but my

grandfather and parents had accompanied me to represent the Liston family.

As it turned out, my grandfather was old friends with Vikson, and there were mutterings that he may have assisted Vikson with starting up his own company.

Apparently, the Silver Broadcasting Channel wanted to focus on showcasing explorations of floating islands which humans had yet to tread and the lives of the adventurers involved in such explorations, so I was very excited to see what he would produce.

However, there was still the issue of having many programs that were off-limits to me. Though Lynokis had become my apprentice and I her master, my parents as her employer were above not just her, but also me.

Every day passed by in the blink of an eye.

And then before I knew it, spring had once again arrived.

“Shall we be off, Young Mistress?”

“Yes.”

I had turned six years old.

Starting this year, I would be spending my days in the dorms of Altoire Academy.

# Afterword

I know barely anything about Hololive or Nijisanji.

Hello, I'm Umikaze Minamino, and I am painfully feeling myself being left behind by the times.

Thank you for picking up this book. Have you bought it yet? No? If you haven't, do bring it to the checkout.

*Nia Liston: The Merciless Maiden* received the 2021 HJ Novel Award, and that is what led to it being published like this today. It was originally a web novel I had been uploading on Narou and AlphaPolis. For various reasons, the title was changed from *Insane Maiden* to *Merciless Maiden*. After some editing, the contents are much more exciting than before.

In other words, I really want you to buy this book. Please and thank you.

By the time you all are reading this, I've probably already passed on...

...passed on to the world of getting rid of my game backlog.

I never intend to let my backlog get so big. I want to play games. I don't want to do work. I want to play games, I tell you! I never thought when I was still a kid that I would want to play them this much. Or maybe I did. I wanted to play games ever since I was a kid. All I do is wish I had more time in the day. I want a PS5 too, but they're all sold out everywhere.

I have no time to play games, but I can watch Let's Plays while working.

It was that thought that led to me being curious about groups like Hololive and Nijisanji. But I still don't quite get it... They're the same thing, aren't they? Is their company different? Or are they different fundamentally? I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. We're in an era of diversity but everything is so diverse that my understanding can't keep up.

Well, one thing I can say for certain is that they must be fairies living in the



electric world. There's no such thing as a real person inside of them! That's...not the kind of thing we say anymore, is it?

I wish to catch up to the youth of today.

Did you stare at the cover until you lasered a hole through it?

It's a young girl. Isn't it wonderful? I've always thought that young girls would save the world, but this art makes me think that it may be true. It was drawn by my illustrator, JISHAKU-sensei. The illustrations he drew for the story itself are also great, so I'd recommend you give them a look.

JISHAKU-sensei, thank you for all the wonderful art.

Did you see the information written on the obi of the book? Maybe on the back side? What, there was no obi? Then look it up on the internet!

Yes, *Nia Liston* will also be getting a manga serialization. This little girl will get to shine in manga form as well. Kabuto Kodai-sensei will be the mangaka in charge. He's someone that draws very pretty girls.

Make sure to keep an eye out even more than you ever have before.

My editor, S-san, probably found meetings with me hard with how selfish I was being. I'm really, truly sorry. But also thank you for all of your help.

I hope we'll be working together for a long time to come.

And finally, to my readers. Thank you to those who have been following me ever since my web novel days. You're the reason that *Nia Liston* could be published like this.

I truly am so thankful, and I hope you'll continue reading.

See you again in volume 2.

# Bonus Short Stories

## Lunchtime

Lunchtime had arrived.

Now that this body had finally recovered enough to take food without rejecting it, I'd begun looking forward to mealtimes.

I looked out the open window, the lace curtains fluttering in the gentle breeze. The weather was good again today, and the outside looked dazzlingly bright.

I would be able to graduate from using my wheelchair soon too.

Truth be told, I didn't even need it right now. I could already walk, and there was nothing wrong with my lower body. But I had so little stamina, and the disease was still rooted within me, so I would tire very quickly when I moved.

There was no need for me to rush, though. I just had to watch for when the time was right.

Now then.

"Young Mistress, it's time for lunch."

Lynokis brought my lunch at the usual time. I'd been waiting. My stomach was sufficiently empty.

"Thank you," I responded as I sat myself up.

I was still in recovery, so I was generally in my bed most of the time. I'd be right up and out of here the moment I thwarted this cursed disease, though. And then I could eat at the dining table.

"Hm."

The meal was laid out in front of me. As per usual, there were very few solids, and it was too bland for my liking. The choice of ingredients didn't look

particularly appetizing. There was no meat either.

The one saving grace of it all was the fruit that would be my dessert. It was cut into thin pieces, but this alone retained its natural taste amongst the food I was served, so I enjoyed it much more.

I picked up my spoon and shoved it into what looked like some kind of porridge. I silently brought it to my mouth.

Yup, it was the usual insufficient flavor and texture. But there was no doubt it was easily digestible. I needed to just suck it up and eat it. Anyway, it wasn't as if I hated it either.

"Young Mistress, what would you like to watch today?"

While I was mentally complaining about how lacking the meal was, Lynokis floated the MagiPad by my bedside.

This was magivision, a technology that allowed one to see faraway lands and moments in the past. I was very much surprised by it at first. When I was faced with this strange and mysterious object, I felt a real helplessness at being thrust into this era.

"Why not put it on whatever you like? There's only one thing I'm allowed to watch at this time, anyway."

But that overwhelmed feeling faded when I realized that there were many programs I was forbidden from watching by my parents because they believed it would be too shocking for an ill child. And that meant that I could only watch the boring ones.

There weren't even enough channels for me to say I had a choice; there was a grand total of two. The fact I had restrictions on what I was allowed to watch when the number of programs itself was already so restricted only made it worse.

How was one even meant to *begin* enjoying that?

*Show me bloodshed. Show me some pictures with blood spurting everywhere.*

There was no way I could say something like that, so a part of me had just given up.

“Oh, please don’t sulk.”

I wasn’t sulking. I was just disappointed.

“Look, *Tales of a Liston Stroll* is airing again today. Let’s watch it together.”

When I glanced at the crystal screen, a middle-aged man with a distinctive face was walking down a countryside road. This was one of the few programs I was allowed to watch, so I had seen this man’s distinctive face so much I was sick of it. In fact, I was seeing it every day.

“Hmph.”

I didn’t expect much from the program, *and* I was sick of this man’s face. But for some reason, when it was on, I couldn’t help but watch. Magivision just had that kind of power.

*Stop drinking already! It’s only the early afternoon. I’m so jealous. Stop being an ass.*

Grumbling away inside, I ate my bland meal while I watched that old man happily gulping down his alcohol.

This frustration would continue for just a little longer. If I recovered just a little more, I was sure my range of movement would increase exponentially. And when that time came, I would negotiate with my parents to let me watch more magivision programs.

## **The Watchful Eye of the Attendant**

*The young mistress has been acting strange recently.*

Lynokis Funk had had this thought many a time over the past few weeks.

She had been hired and assigned to the daughter of the Liston family as her personal attendant. The daughter’s name was Nia Liston. Only a short while ago, Nia had been a bedridden young girl who it seemed would just disappear at any moment. Lynokis had not been told what illness Nia was inflicted with, but she believed that it was a very grave disease, if not terminal.

Lynokis had initially only been temporarily hired to assist with Nia’s daily

needs and to be there as someone for the ailing girl to talk to. She was also to serve as a bodyguard, as the family called in many doctors from all over the land—there was no telling what kind of shady medicine they would try, after all, so she was to stay by the girl’s side as often as possible.

And so, Lynokis had no choice but to bear witness to a child battling against disease. She had no choice but to watch a small girl—who wasn’t even a teen—do her best to keep up with all manner of treatments and medications. Honestly, seeing a child suffer so much was unbearable, but Lynokis made sure she was watching over each treatment to the end.

Before Lynokis knew it, she began to feel strongly for Nia, almost viewing her as her own child. She began praying every day that the young girl’s condition would improve.

Despite every attempt, though, Nia’s condition appeared to be getting no better. With no other options left to them, the Listons accepted the help of a shady hooded man, and then...

Then, Nia’s condition began to improve.

Even the Saintess of the Holy Kingdom of Asternia had failed to cure her, and yet this suspicious man that had appeared with his dubious healing method had somehow succeeded. Though it could be that it was a different treatment that had worked and the effects simply took time. There was no definitive evidence for what had really helped.

But...it was not worth lingering on. What was important was that Nia was recovering.

Having developed feelings of affection unbecoming of a hired attendant, nothing brought Lynokis more joy than Nia being healthy.

And yet, there was something...off. Something off about Nia. Or perhaps more accurately, *everything* was off about Nia. The girl was just one big uncanny tangle.

“The weather is fine again today, Young Mistress.”

“Indeed it is.”

Nia's condition had been notably good recently. In the last few days, it had even become possible to sit her in her wheelchair and bring her out for a walk around the garden—though really, Lynokis was the one doing the walking.

The weather was good again today. The sprawling blue sky had not a cloud in sight. The sunlight beamed down on the vibrant, well-maintained garden. Though she was of a commoner background, even Lynokis could appreciate the beauty of the Liston estate's garden.

Their walks would take them around that beautiful garden. It was quite the size, so even one loop around took a long time. It served as a nice change of pace, Lynokis thought. Especially as Nia had been confined to her bed for so long when her illness had been at its worst. So often would she be depressed, barely speaking, sometimes quietly crying for her parents when it was especially painful. Lynokis's heart had hurt at the sight.

She had become an attendant because the pay was good, but in truth, she had actually started to regret it a little. This wasn't a job she should have picked up so casually.

The one looking after a small girl desperately fighting for her life was someone who had picked up the job for the money. Lynokis couldn't help but see herself as a terribly shallow human being for it. But that was exactly the reason she was so overjoyed to see Nia get better and better each day.

"Heeeeeeey, Lynokis! Can I ask you to come over here for a minute?" one of the old gardeners in charge of this glorious garden called over.

"Did something happen? I'll be back in a moment," Lynokis said to Nia. There was a bit of a distance between her and the gardener, so she decided to go ask directly rather than shout back.

This was the Liston family's garden. There would be nothing dangerous here. That was why Lynokis felt there was no harm in leaving Nia's side for a short moment. They were only a few feet apart, and Lynokis could still see where Nia sat. If anything did happen, Lynokis could return right away.

"Of course. Don't worry, I'll be waiting right here," Nia replied.

Having received the okay, Lynokis parked the wheelchair in front of one of the

flower beds and headed over to the gardener.

Right, there was nothing wrong with her initial assessment. There was nothing here that would endanger Nia.

However.

It was the trivial things that were out of the norm that showed Lynokis a different side of her charge.

“I will inform the head butler for you.”

The gardener had simply wanted her to pass on the message that he wanted to discuss the flowers to be planted for the next season. She could tell Jayes or something later.

After finishing her conversation with the gardener, Lynokis turned to head back—and was greeted with a shocking sight.

A white butterfly was fluttering right in front of Nia. Just as Lynokis was thinking that the sight of a beautiful young girl and a cute little butterfly together was practically art, Nia moved.

“What...?”

At first, Lynokis thought her eyes were playing tricks on her. But they weren't.

Nia had caught the wings of the butterfly between her right index and middle fingers.

Lynokis was sure she had been watching closely, yet she never even saw the moment that Nia caught the little insect. Before she knew it, there the butterfly was caught, and Nia had her right arm raised.

“Y-Young Mistress?” Lynokis called from a slight distance away. Nia let go of the butterfly and turned around at her voice.

“Have you finished what you needed to do?”

Nothing about Nia was out of the ordinary. She was acting as if nothing had happened. The only proof of what had happened, the butterfly, frantically escaped, fluttering in fright at having been caught.

“Yes, um, but what were you just...?”

“Hm? Oh, you mean the butterfly? All I did was lift a hand and suddenly I had caught it.”

All she did was lift a hand and suddenly she had caught it.

“It was just a fluke.”

It was just a fluke.

Did she think Lynokis was stupid? Could a regular human even manage such a feat? Lynokis was both athletic and trained in martial arts, but even she wasn't sure if she could manage that. Well...she could probably catch a butterfly. But to so delicately catch a fluttering butterfly specifically by the wings? To so delicately catch a butterfly that you could then let it fly away without injury?

“I...see.”

But if the young mistress herself said it was a fluke, then it must be so.

It was just a fluke. It was much more natural to believe such a thing, so it must be the case.

The strong sense of unease that Lynokis felt here was the moment that she ended up much more curious about Nia's speech and actions.

“Young Mistress, what are you doing?”

“Oh, I just wanted to try holding it.”

*Why?*

When Lynokis opened the door, Nia was sitting on her bed holding a flower vase. It was the one that had been decorating the room. She had taken out the flowers and placed the vase with a slight bit of water still inside on her knees, holding it in both hands. The vase barely fit into a child's hands.

Lynokis had no idea why the young mistress was holding it.

“Hmph.” With a cute little sound of exertion, Nia slightly lifted the vase off her knees.

“Young Mistress... What are you doing?”

“I just told you. I wanted to try holding it.”



*Yes, but why?*

Wait, no. Lynokis knew those movements. Those were the actions of someone training their body.

The moment she had that realization, she chose to say no more. As sudden and surprising as it may have been, if this was just how Nia's desire to get healthier and stronger showed itself, then Lynokis had no reason to stop her. Rather, she wanted nothing more than to support her. The attendant didn't want to say too much and be the cause of Nia losing her motivation, so she would say nothing.

But there was no denying that the sudden and surprising occurrence of those actions left Lynokis feeling uneasy.

Nia had been very distant while she had been bedridden, rarely doing anything proactively, yet here she was acting on her own volition. Something about it felt off to Lynokis, but this interest in fitness was overall good. She wouldn't criticize Nia for it nor would she stop her.

A few days later...

"I've gotten fairly used to this now."

Nia grabbed the mouth of the vase and lifted it up off the floor until her arm was parallel to the ground. She repeated that over and over.

It was the kind of repetitive training that even adults couldn't do without being decently strong...

This was definitely something good.

*Even I might not be able to do that*, Lynokis thought to herself, but she never said such things out loud. Because Nia becoming healthy was a good thing. The sight of Nia putting all her effort into becoming well again was touching.

Though it didn't change just how off it all felt...

Nia continued training her body even further. Before long, she was grabbing random things around the room to train with. What had been a sickly,

emaciated body had suddenly turned into that of an average child. The ratio of muscle was considerably higher, though.

“Hmph, hmph, hmph!”

Honestly, Lynokis was starting to find the sight of Nia doing push-ups at a monstrous speed almost lacking. She started wondering if it would be better to place some heavy rocks on her back.

“Young Mistress, it’s time for snacks.”

“I will be there in a moment.”

Having barely broken a sweat, Nia stood up and made her way to the table.

*When was it?* Lynokis suddenly thought to herself. *When was it that I began taking it for granted that I would just find whatever Nia did unusual?*

But it wasn’t anything bad.

Right, Nia wasn’t doing anything bad.

Nia was doing the right thing.

There was a moment where Lynokis began fooling herself. Fooling herself that what she felt was off about Nia was a good thing, that there was nothing mistaken about it. She had so frantically convinced herself of this. She was a little scared of what truth lay beyond that unease she felt.

And on top of it all, Nia really was not doing anything wrong. Just what *was* wrong about her training herself to remove a disease from her body? There was no reason to try and stop her.

Her precious Nia was getting healthier day by day. Just what was wrong with that?

There was...undoubtedly still unease. Unease brought about by everything Nia said and did. It definitely existed. It existed so blatantly that there was no way for Lynokis to deny it anymore.

But it would take a bit longer before Lynokis managed to dispel the deceptions she had cast upon herself.

## The Sound of Martial Arts

It was the first time I had heard that sound. And yet, it was somehow familiar. It was an irregular *clack, clack* that felt good to the ears.

“Hmm...”

It was the sound of martial arts, of wood hitting wood—sounds that my past life had heard over and over. Even though this body didn’t have the memories, my soul still remembered.

“Let’s head off now.”

The entrance door was opened, and Lynokis pushed my wheelchair through. Now there was nothing in between, I could hear that sound clearly.

“Look, Young Mistress. Young Master Neal is over there.”

*I know. I’m already watching.*

By the garden, Neal and Lynette were sparring with wooden swords. That was where that nostalgic sound was coming from. It must have been a part of Neal’s daily routine. It was admirable for him to keep up with it even during his summer vacation.

“I would like to watch it up close.”

“Ah, of course.”

My brother was but a child, and Lynette was nothing special either. There would be nothing of note watching two inexperienced combatants fight. I knew that.

But this was enough for now.

I was practically starving to feel martial arts again. Anything would suffice. I just wanted to see two people fighting. I wanted to fight too, if I could. If that wasn’t possible, then just viewing was fine.

That was where my mind was at.

My brother, with wooden sword in hand, had sweat running down his brow,

and his opponent, Lynette, was having nary an issue.

Hm. Maybe this wasn't so fun to watch. Or maybe it...was?

I was pleasantly surprised that I wasn't as bored by it as I had expected. *I could spend a good bit of time watching this.* Neal was swinging with proper form and receiving blows with proper form. He wasn't half bad. He was six or seven years old, if I recalled correctly, so he might have been quite strong for his age.

"I'd like to go closer."

"You'll get in Young Master Neal's way."

Really? It wasn't my intention to disturb them, so I was fine staying where I was, then. I continued silently observing their sparring from a bit of a distance away.

"Are you curious?" Lynokis asked, seeing how intently I was observing them. "You can start training in swordsmanship as well when your body is recovered."

"What?" I doubted my ears for a moment and then chuckled. "You're joking, yes?"

"I was. It wouldn't suit you at all, Young Mistress."

The reasons were different, but Nia and Lynokis were thinking the same thing.

*My fists are the strongest. I have no need for weapons,* was Nia's thought.

*I hope she grows up as graceful as a daughter of an aristocrat should, with no need for weapons,* was Lynokis's.

Nia did not need to wield a weapon.

Their reasoning was different, and yet that one thought was perfectly aligned.



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Nia Liston: The Merciless Maiden Volume 1

by Umikaze Minamino

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