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Nia Tiston

The Merciless Maiden


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Illustrator
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The Technique I was teaching Lynokis now was one of the most basic.

**“Don’t give in to the desire to blink.
This will be over in a moment.”**

Take all the chi within your body, take a large step forward, and fire that chi out through your fist.

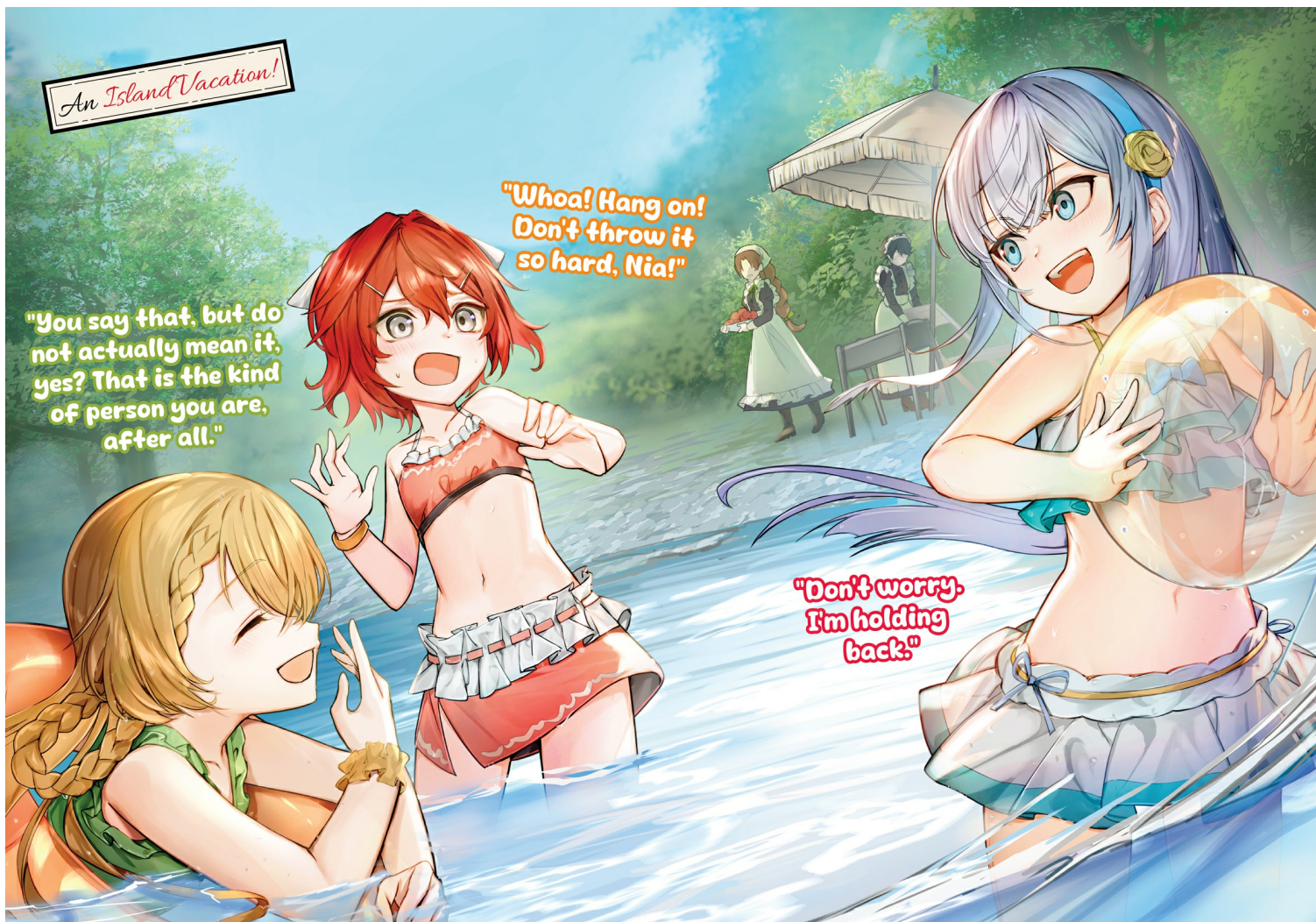
A sound like a thunderbolt shooting down from the heavens rang out. The advancing shock wave I called forth powered through the lake, splitting it into two.

An Island Vacation!

"You say that, but do not actually mean it, yes? That is the kind of person you are, after all."

"Whoa! Hang on! Don't throw it so hard, Nia!"


"Don't worry. I'm holding back."





“Okay. Then I’ll say it straight.”

*Having dispelled her doubts,
Lynokis looked directly at me.*



**“Um... Young Mistress,
do you still intend to
hide that you are a
Valiant Spirit?”**

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Prologue

No matter how many times I visited it, the garden of the Liston Estate was always a beautiful sight. I had little interest in flowers or plants, but I could still enjoy gazing at them now and again. The tigerless lily that one of the gardeners had planted for me two years ago had bloomed wonderfully and fulfilled its duty. Since then, the gardeners would grow those flowers every year.

“When we stroll through the garden like this, I can’t help but think back to when you were still in a wheelchair,” Lynokis said, as we went on a wander around the garden after entrusting our luggage to Jayes.

“As do I.” When I’d been in my wheelchair, we’d made sure to go around the garden almost every day if the weather was nice. Though I had only been away from the Liston Estate for about half a year for my studies, I still felt nostalgic; it almost felt like I had been away for years.

If anything, perhaps that was a sign of just how busy my school life had been that first semester. Even though I had moved into the dorms, my free time was almost entirely occupied by magivision, as if nothing had changed. There were still the financial issues of my family to consider, recordings to prepare for, and new projects to think up. I was faced with so many problems I couldn’t simply solve with my fists, and it made for a challenging experience.

I let out a sigh. Whenever I remembered that the recordings—that I couldn’t breeze through with martial arts—would begin again tomorrow, I could feel the melancholy creeping in. My life in the dorms had been busy, and it seemed my summer vacation wouldn’t be much different. They would no doubt make sure to pack my schedule so unbelievably full. Since it was summer vacation, they might as well take advantage of my plentiful free time—with absolutely no consideration for how I might feel about it.

“I imagine this will be the last day I can laze around like this.” We had just returned from the capital and were now killing time before lunch.

“The master’s letter did say that you would have recordings as soon as you

returned, after all.”

It did indeed.

“How much do you think they’re going to make me do?”

“Well, since you now live at a dorm, you aren’t able to make room for as many recordings as before, so I imagine they want to build up a backlog of footage over the summer before you go back. With that in mind, your schedule is probably quite crammed.”

It seemed Lynokis had the same thoughts as me. My schedule would likely be stuffed so full there wouldn’t even be gaps to breathe—a truly tiring amount of work. I really was faced with so much that couldn’t be solved with my fists. It was dire.

“Oh, but they promised you would at least have your last five days off, didn’t they? So let’s work hard with that as your target, Young Mistress!”

That was right. For the last five days of my summer vacation, I would have not a single minute of work scheduled. It would be a holiday in the truest sense. I had already finished negotiating with my father: on the last days of my break, I would be spending time with Hildetaura and Reliared at one of the royal family’s private floating islands. That was what a vacation *should* be.

Apparently, it was a peaceful, relaxing island with the bare minimum of people living on it. In that case, I could train or partake in ascetic practices as I pleased. I could do whatever I wanted in general, in fact, as it sounded like there was also a dungeon there. If there was the time to, I definitely wanted to give it a look.

This summer, I would train without reserve—both myself, and Lynokis. Until then, I needed to put my all into my work.

My true summer vacation was yet to start.

Chapter 1: An Arduous “Vacation”

“Neal! Nia!”

“Welcome home, you two!”

It was early evening, when the sun was still burning the distant sky. I had been chatting with my brother as we awaited dinner at the table, when our parents came bursting into the room after returning home from work. They were back a little earlier than usual, so they had probably finished up work early to be home in time to have dinner with us—we had been away a long time, after all. They remained the same old doting parents they always were.

“It’s nice to see you again, father, mother,” Neal said as they entered.

“Glad to see you’re both still healthy.” It had been a few months since our last meeting, but our parents looked no different. At least, for the most part, but...they did look a little more tired. Their flow of chi was a little disordered.

Our parents sat down at the table, and for the first time in a while, a gathering of the Liston family began.

There was no end to the topics for us to discuss, but unsurprisingly, we gravitated towards the martial arts tournament. The broadcast had given outsiders visual access to the school’s interior, something that was usually off-limits to the public, so given that they both were a part of the magivision industry and had children in attendance, our parents were both significantly interested. That tournament had been more of a test run, so it was undecided if we would make it a regular thing, but I didn’t even have to ask to know just how much they were looking forward to our next on-campus recording.

I wasn’t the one with the power to approve projects, but personally, I saw no reason for us *not* to make the tournament a regular thing—it had been a massive success, after all.

“You almost qualified for an award, didn’t you?” Our father had once been a

boy himself, so he was certainly proud of his son's achievements. Neal had managed to achieve sixth place in the tournament, narrowly missing out on top five, but given he was still in his third year of elementary school, it was impressive that he'd made it that far. There was a big difference between a third and a sixth year, and there had even been middle school students participating—even more reason for our father to be so proud.

"You did outstanding work as well, Nia." My mother was kind enough to also praise me, so as to not show preferential treatment. Since I hadn't entered the tournament, my main duties had been interviews and other menial tasks. I would argue I'd had more time on the screen than even my brother, given I'd been introducing so many of the competitors. Nothing I'd done was particularly praiseworthy, though.

"I simply did as I always do. Please continue praising brother more than you ever have. You saw him, didn't you? He tried so hard! He was truly gallant."

"Quit it, Nia..."

Is he embarrassed? Now this is a rare sight indeed! His beauty made his bashful expression quite powerful. I could tell that the mansion's servants, including Lynette, were captivated by the sight.

"You're sure? Then I'll make sure to keep doing just that," my father said.

"Of course. The future head of the Listons is growing into such a fine man," my mother added.

"No, please stop already..."

I wasn't of an age that I craved my parents' praise. I would rather they showered any praise intended for me on my brother instead.

The evening was spent on a long-awaited reunion with our parents, a peaceful feast filled with parents' praise for their child, and me, watching over that scene from a slight distance away.

This wasn't so bad either.

We finished our meal, and out came mousse for dessert.

“Nia, has your schedule for the summer been decided?” my father asked. My father’s question had been not about my leisure time but about my work.

It seemed there had been a shift in atmosphere without me realizing. “I have heard that I have recordings every day starting tomorrow. Correct?” My schedule was entirely managed by Lynokis, so I turned to confirm with her.

“Yes, Young Mistress. Your schedule has essentially been accelerated, so you’ll have at least two weeks jam-packed with work.” I imagined we were recording enough episodes of *Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation* to last from fall to winter. But given my father had to ask, it seemed my parents had no direct involvement with my work schedule. My parents were the chairpersons, and therefore managers of our territory’s broadcasting station, so they were a bit removed from the production crews and planning teams.

My exact schedule would most likely be given to me tomorrow, when I went to my first shoot of the summer.

“There’s no need to push yourself so hard, you know?” my father said. “You’ve finally been given the chance to come home, and yet you don’t have a single day to relax.”

“No need to worry about that. I’m doing this because I want to.”

Besides, I was the one who had asked for this in the first place. Once I finished my recordings in the Liston territories during the first half of my summer vacation, I would then stay over at the Silver territories for a short while before returning to the capital. I still didn’t know the details, but I was scheduled to appear on programs in each of the territories. I had asked to have the schedule adjusted to let me participate, so I imagined the adults would use their heads for me and come up with a schedule that would accommodate that request.

The last five days were where all of my excitement was poured into. I would be spending the final days of my vacation on Hildetaura’s private floating island. I would definitely rest, play, eat, drink, throw up, train, meditate, and rest again. I had put together an itinerary that would *not* be shifted.

Since it was a private island owned by royalty, it was quiet and devoid of people, and though it was small, it apparently also had a dungeon. That meant I might get the chance to do some dungeon exploration—but even if I didn’t, that

was fine. All I wanted was to be able to take down some monsters. I didn't know how much power I could pull forth from such a small body, but I wanted the opportunity to use a full-power punch.

I hadn't had the opportunity to use my full strength since becoming Nia Liston, not even once, but if I were to take on a monster, no one would be able to complain if I accidentally punched it a little too hard. *I won't walk in thinking I'll definitely get the chance, though. Just that it would be nice if I did.* If I got my hopes up *too* high, I'd end up disappointing myself. I'd already done that numerous times in this life.

"I will let you know of the final schedule once I have been informed."

"Please do."

"Also, brother, no one would complain if you joined me on my recordings, you know?"

"Mmnh?!"

I yanked Neal into the conversation as he idly ate away at his mousse, clearly believing himself to be completely unrelated to the current topic. *Come on, there's no way you're not included here! Magivision is the Listons' family business. Get a grip, future successor.*

"No, I'm fine..." Neal muttered. "Especially since that tournament program is still being rebroadcast. I don't want to appear on magivision again for a while."

Because of the fan letters, huh? Those blades crafted from words had stabbed into his heart, and the scars still remained. I hadn't expected a different answer, anyway.

"I'm pretty sure you can just come along and watch. No need to appear on-screen. You could think of it as a little sightseeing trip. It's fun going to places you wouldn't usually," I offered.

"I see... Is that really all it is...?"

Father quietly sighed to himself, while mother continued smiling as she watched over Neal falling into thought.

You're so naive, brother. If he came to a production site, he could be recorded

at any time. The moment he came with me, it was over. “I’m just accompanying her” doesn’t fly at a recording. My parents weren’t saying anything, despite having seen through my trick. Perhaps they saw this as another rite of passage for Neal to become an adult.

Adults fooled their children, sometimes craftily, sometimes blatantly. Seeing through that trick and yet choosing to go along with it anyway could be called being considerate, but it would be a bit much to expect that from a child. Still, they wanted him to learn that adults told lies. There were times where the moment you acquiesced to something, you couldn’t take it back. It was good for him to learn now, before it was too late and the lie he was fooled by resulted in a far worse outcome.

“I’ll be leaving now.” I stood from my seat once our conversation had reached a conclusion. That had been the first time in a long time that our family had all been able to sit around the dining table and take our time appreciating our meal, so we had been here for much longer than usual. It was around the time that my father had asked about my work schedule that we had started eating much slower.

My brother and I would be able to bathe and unwind right away, but our parents had come straight here after returning home from work, so they were still in their suits. They needed to get changed and take their own baths, so I didn’t want to keep them for too long. If they forced themselves to stay awake while they were so tired, it would have a negative effect on their productivity the next day.

“Ah, wait, Nia. I’ll be inviting Bendelio over in the coming days—he wants to talk about future projects,” my father informed me.

“Understood. Do let me know once a specific date has been decided.”

After that interaction, I returned to my room with Lynokis.

“Shall we get your homework done now, Young Mistress?”

Oh, right...

In order to spend the last days of my vacation truly carefree, I needed to gradually knock out my summer homework over the coming days. Thankfully, I

already knew a lot of the content since it was still intended for children, but I really was bad at using my brain. In fact, that was the whole reason I'd ended up seeking power that could surpass anyone in my last life—the kind of power that would allow me to destroy anyone in a single blow.

It seemed this life wanted me to use my head much more... I'd walked the path of the warrior in my past life, but now I must walk the path of the scholar. I was deeply aware of the irony that my head was as empty as it was tough.

“The fact that you don't run away even though you look positively disgruntled is one of the things I love about you, Young Mistress.”

“The fact that you are always ready to prevent me from running away is one of the things I hate about you, Lynokis.”

“This is for your sake, as well.”

“Sometimes, good intentions can lead to harm, you know.”

“Enough of this. Let's hurry and get started. Please ask if you need anything explained.” My disciple so lightly swept my concerns aside. She even took out a MagiPad and started watching programs I wasn't allowed to watch. With tea and biscuits! She was completely lounging around while I battled with my homework.

Have you heard of respect, my dear student? You should respect your master. What even is this? Why is the attendant relaxing while her charge is diligently doing her homework? As scathing as my thoughts were, there was no point in me spending too much time on this. Might as well get started.

That marked the beginning of my summer vacation. As soon as it started, I began doing double the work I had to carry out while at school. I had prepared myself to end up exceptionally busy, but I had greatly underestimated just how much work there would be.

When I received my final schedule, only one thought crossed my mind: *Are they trying to kill me?*

Thirty-two recordings in two weeks...?! Sure, I might have been the one to ask that they fill the first half of my vacation with work, but who'd taken that as

permission to stuff it *that* full? *Bendelio, you fiend. You could've settled with just your face being distinctive. You didn't have to make a schedule distinctive of a murderer...*

Two recordings in one day was already mentally taxing. With a schedule like this, was it not likely I would end up having to do *three* in one day? I tried passive-aggressively voicing my complaints to Bendelio when he decided to accompany me between shoots, and that utter slave driver simply laughed at me.

"Ha ha ha! You'll be fine, Nia. You're cute, after all."

For the first time in a while, I felt myself wanting to beat someone up without proper justification. I could make him lose his balance with a low kick and then smash his face in with a straight punch. That "cute" compliment that he'd tacked on at the end just angered me even more. I was so irritated by it all that I increased the intensity of Lynokis's training. If she didn't like it, then she should curse Bendelio, not me.

Recording from morning to evening, training, and then homework. Sometimes, we'd even stay overnight at the location. And so I spent those frantic days, longing for my school life where free time was not a myth.

One day, after I had reached a point where I stopped bothering to track how much time had passed, Bendelio came home with my parents. It was apparently day six at that point. I didn't care. I simply wished for the end.

Oh, right, father said something about having a meeting with Bendelio, didn't he? I went to the reception room once I was called, but the sound of Bendelio's name was enough to set me off, so I asked for Neal to be called as well. I wanted to see if I could force my brother into a position somewhere. If he didn't like it, then he should curse that distinctive face, not me.

Had it been about two years since the last time we'd had a meeting with us five? The first time had been after we'd reported to the world that I was cured of my disease. Bendelio had come around and asked if I wanted to continue appearing on magivision. We'd had a lot of meetings at the Liston Estate since then, but they were always during the school semester, so my brother had been

at the capital and therefore unable to attend.

It was a nostalgic gathering. Where everyone was sitting, the servants standing at attention—everything was the same.

“We’d like you to pick a few project proposals that appeal to you.” With his frustratingly cheerful face, Bendelio pulled a thick stack of papers from his bag and slapped them onto the table. “We ask that you pick a minimum of three. Though we welcome you wanting to do more, of course.”

You’re kidding me... Are those all project proposals? And why did I need to pick three? Was he telling me they were going to pile even more work on top of what I already had?!

“Mr. Bendelio.”

“Hm?”

“Can you come outside with me for a moment? I’d like to talk with you in private.” With my fists. I would *love* to discuss the idea of his proposals...in a certain language called violence.

“Ha ha ha. A very tempting invitation, but your parents would definitely never let that happen. Let’s talk about your fun, enjoyable work instead.”

Yeah, fun for you, maybe! Damn it all! I wanted to punch that damn face! I wanted to punch it so hard!

Okay, stop. Get a hold of yourself, Nia. Complaining isn’t going to decrease your workload no matter how much you want it to.

I limited my choices to only three new projects.

The first was *A Game of Chase with Nia Liston! Our Dog Won’t Lose!* Apparently, this was an idea they’d come up with after I’d had a recording at a farm and beaten the sheepdog at a game of fetch. The broadcasting company had received several letters stating that the letter writer’s dog was faster, and that had led to the idea of making a series of episodes of me racing those dogs.

“Brother, you could appear in this, couldn’t you? All you have to do is run.”

“Hang in there, Nia.”

The second was *A Capital Tour with the Twin Princes of the Ice Rose*. It appeared the popularity of the Ice Rose had been steadily increasing ever since I'd appeared onstage during *The Girl Who Fell in Love*. This proposal stemmed from the endless passionate requests to see Julian and Lucida on the screen again.

"When we inquired about it, Julian said that they'd rather not do a solo program while they still aren't used to magivision, but they'd be happy to give it a try if a veteran like you were to support them."

Since I was already acquainted with them, it would make working with them much easier compared to someone I had no familiarity with, so I accepted that project.

"Brother, you could join us in this too."

"I'm here for you, Nia."

And finally, the third was *Hospital Visit (tmp)*. This was actually a proposal that had been considered quite early on in the process. Since I used to be bedridden myself, I received quite a lot of fan letters from those who were chronically ill. They had chosen to put the proposal aside while they observed how I was healing, but then they'd put it off for so long that they'd never gotten back around to it until a whole two years later. It made sense. If I went to visit patients right after I'd been cured and then suddenly fell ill again, we'd end up stealing hope from the people fighting their diseases.

It was a project they had postponed until I could confidently go, "Look, I'm so healthy now! I completely overcame my disease!" This time two years ago, I had still been horribly thin. I'd *looked* weak. I had still been at a stage where everyone around me was afraid to take their eyes off of me.

"Brother. Brother, I really think you should be the one to do this too."

"Don't let us down, Nia."

"What if I did? I don't mind going with you, but this should be the work of the successor to the Liston family. Think of it as a family duty."

"All right, all right, I get it already."

I had originally forced Neal to come with me partly because of my anger, but I really did think he should be the one to do these projects.

And so, those three new projects were piled on top of my original workload.

Bendelio smiled and sifted through the remaining proposals. “There’s no other projects you want to do, are there? Like this one here.”

“I will smash your face in.”

They were already asking me to do thirty-two recordings—piling three on top of that was already bringing me to the limits of my patience. Surely they didn’t expect me to be happy about them expecting even more from me? *Leave while I can still keep my smile up in front of my parents, you ugly-faced scoundrel.*

“I wouldn’t be against a girl as cute as you beating me up. Now, about this project here...”

He *still* wouldn’t give up?! I’d already threatened him two or three times already. He might not have been strong physically, but he had a mind of steel. He was quite persuasive, and he did good work too. *Man, if only my parents weren’t here, I’d let him get a glimpse of my hostility.*

I had decided I would one day definitely beat him up, and I made sure to give him the opportunity to back down—but Bendelio refused to give up. *I won’t forget this. I swear I won’t!*

I had pretty much gotten used to the endless recordings by now. Who wouldn’t after having done so many in a row? This perhaps was a bad sign, but honestly, by the second half of the marathon schedule, I was working on autopilot. I was pretty sure if I gave it as much focus and attention as I usually did, I wouldn’t hold up through this trial. I would probably snap. I would give in to impulse and very much do something I shouldn’t to that distinctive face.

Still, there was at least one recording I’d enjoyed—it was the one with the dog. What had started as me playing around with a dog had turned into a full-blown episode. We’d started with an introduction to the dog and its owner, then moved on to a recording showing off the dog doing some cool tricks and also showcasing its athletic ability. I’d appealed to the audience a little by

showing my cute side while I played with the dog, and then finally, we'd ended with the race. Honestly, recordings where I got to move my body were relaxing for me. It felt good to get outside and mindlessly run around a wide-open space. Were I to be selfish, I would wish that my opponent were a little faster... But that was it, really.



Towards the end, both the owner and the dog started to get grumpy because I kept winning no matter how many rematches they called for, but you couldn't really say that was my fault, right? It was the dog's fault for being slow.

Over those days of performing on autopilot, that was the only recording that left any impression on me.

The busiest two weeks of my life passed by in a flash, and finally, the last day arrived.

"Thank you for listening. Now then, cheers!" At my father's call, everyone present raised their glass in a toast. I had a glass filled with juice that I also raised. Underneath the magic lights floating in the air, our friendly banquet began.

Today's party was a private affair. I didn't often get to see the chef of our mansion, but he had set up a barbecue in the garden and was grilling meat and vegetables while the other servants hurriedly brought food and drink to the guests. It was all in celebration of my last day of work...sort of. Naturally, it wasn't actually my last day of work, but that was the idea behind the whole get-together.

My parents wanted to go on a vacation with me and Neal, but our schedules just wouldn't match up, so I'd suggested we hold a barbecue so we could at least make *some* sort of memory together over this summer vacation. Originally, we'd intended to only have family at the barbecue, but since I was also partly making it work related, we'd decided others could use it as a way to mark a milestone as well, and so we'd invited some other related parties. That had also been my suggestion.

Said related parties were of course the staff of the Liston Broadcasting Station. We'd invited the production crew—who, by this point, were probably closer to me than my parents—that darned Bendelio, and those from other divisions I never got much opportunity to speak with, such as the planning and editing departments. It ended up being quite a large gathering.

As it turned out, many of the staff members were from commoner families, so rather than a stuffy, aristocratic party, we'd decided to go for a more casual

dress code. We had given permission for them to bring their families, so there were also many children around. That being said, this was ultimately still a private affair. You could say it was the chairman's appreciation for his staff members.

After that murderously overcrowded schedule, I had finally made it to this day. I'd ultimately ended up doing thirty-seven recordings after that distinctive face shoved even more work on me.

Thirty-seven recordings in two weeks.

It had been utter hell.

My mental state had gone completely out of whack; I couldn't even remember what the first recording had been, and yet my resentment of Bendelio only grew. It was such a bizarre workload I genuinely started to think he was after my life. I was sure that amount would've felt like a death sentence to an adult, as well.

I was confident in my physical stamina, but when it came to the mental... I couldn't train my mind or my brainpower like I could my body, and they were no doubt affected the most. I was all for a deathmatch with my life on the line, and I quite liked being put into a critical situation where just one misjudgment could end it all...but I felt like a different part of my mind had been worn down by all of this.

Me being busy meant that the production crew that accompanied me had also been busy. Their busyness was proportional to my busyness. Naturally, their work extended beyond just going to my shoots, similar to how I had homework to do at the end of the day. When you put it that way, they might have had it even worse than I had.

"Nia! We finished it! We finally finished it!"

Don't cry, makeup lady. I can completely relate. You're going to make me cry, as well. Don't do that to me at a party.

"We finished it! We're alive! Nia, we survived until the end!"

Don't cry, cameraman. We really had all thought we were going to die. We'd survived two weeks that nearly worked us to our graves.

“Waaaaah... I can finally go back home...”

Don't cry, director. But good work. Go spend plenty of time with your daughter. Before I knew it, the adults of the production crew who had fought through that hellish schedule together with me had gathered around, some holding back their tears, some openly crying, some wailing. *Quit it, or I'll cry too. Are you really okay with me crying? Really?*

We'd made it to the end... We'd really, really made it to the end. Why was there sweat coming from my eyes...?

Thirty-seven whole damn recordings. I'd been made to do so much day after day after day after day, so much that I could barely remember exactly what I'd done anymore.

“I'll never...” Like the first little droplet of rain, those words slipped out of my mouth. And before I knew it, the rest of the crew was joining in my oath: “...forgive Bendelio.” We'd managed to overcome that murderous schedule with those magic words. The times when things were tough, the times when we weren't sure what was tough but it *felt* tough anyway, the times that we'd end up crying without knowing why, the times we'd find ourselves so desperately missing our families, the times we were tempted to just run away from it all, the times we chased after those who tried to escape, determined to not let them be the only ones who made it out, the times we could hear our minds break and we couldn't help but scream, we would voice our resentment towards Bendelio and make it past it all.

We won't let him get away with this!

“Hey, Nia! Good work out there!”

Speak of the literal devil and his disgustingly distinctive face that I wanted to smash right in, and he will appear! *I'll beat the life out of you!*

“Ha ha ha... I guess I'll talk to you guys later!”

Perhaps having sensed something...or perhaps from simply seeing the hateful gazes of everyone around him, myself included, Bendelio left as quickly as he had appeared. Or he saw that everyone was crying and felt a little awkward.

We'll never forgive him. Never!

That summer, I'd forged an unbreakable bond with the production crew and an unwavering grudge against Bendelio.

Ignoring the joke that was only ninety percent truth, that event put an end to the Liston territory recordings for now. I felt nothing but anger towards Bendelio, but I'd accepted the challenge and followed through anyway—because I personally agreed with his words that now was the most ideal time to strike. If I didn't, I would have beat him up long ago, most definitely.

Since the martial arts tournament broadcast a few weeks ago, ratings for magivision had gone up dramatically. It seemed that peeking inside of the academy—an area the viewers usually had no access to—and the fact that their own kids were attending said academy had led to an unprecedented increase in viewership. It was exactly as Hildetaura had predicted—or perhaps what she had aimed for.

Parents whose children were attending Altoire Academy were completely captivated by magivision. We had already sold several more MagiPads. Seeing an opportunity, Bendelio had devised a way to excite the potential audience by broadcasting several more programs of their children's fellow student Nia Liston, and that was how we'd ended up with those horrific thirty-seven recordings on the schedule.

Well, even without that plan, I wouldn't be able to return home again until winter, so we would have needed to stock up on episodes to air, regardless. My issue was that there were way too many recordings to fit into two weeks. That was unacceptable regardless of the reason.

We'd finished recording in the Liston territories, but we'd also planned more recordings in the Silver territories, where I'd be headed tomorrow. After that would be a short stop at the capital. There was no way they would ask me to do anything as unreasonable as Bendelio had, so I wasn't worried.

I can't stay sulking forever. Today's meant to be a party, after all. I told the production crew to enjoy themselves, then parted ways with the companions that had traversed hell with me. *Time to forget about that Bendelio and have my own fun.* With everything being so chaotic, surely they wouldn't notice if I sneaked out some alcohol. Maybe I could find a bottle to steal and have in

secret.

The moment I considered that, however—or, more accurately, the moment I started moving alone—various guests started calling out to me, mainly those from the departments I usually didn't get to meet with. We began with greetings and introductions before naturally falling into conversations about work.

“Nia, that project with the dog was really fun.”

“I agree. I enjoyed it too. If it's received well, it might be worth making it a series.”

“That's a good idea! A pretty girl playing around with fluffy animals from around the world... It might work!”

If we were going to have scenes of me playing with the animals, they better make it before the races; the animals would hate me too much afterwards.

I spoke with staff I didn't really get to see, endlessly bad-mouthed Bendelio with the production crew members I happened to bump into along the way, and watched over my brother with a smirk as he was fussed over by the older ladies. And thus I finished my last night at the Liston Estate for this vacation.

I thought it was pretty fun. Even though I didn't get the chance to have any alcohol.

The next day, I left for the Silver territories with Neal—who had ended up asking if he could come along because he'd realized our parents would try too hard to accommodate him if he were left in the house alone—and Lynokis.

“Nia's coming over... Nia's coming over...” Rikelvita, the second daughter of the Silver family, was once more muttering to herself as she watched Nia Liston on the MagiPad at the breakfast table. Her expression was fraught with anxiety, as if she were being hunted by something.

Rikelvita was a fan of Nia Liston. She was a creep with a filthy nature and ulterior motives she made no effort to hide, indecently raking her eyes up and down a young girl's body without reserve—but a fan was still a fan.

In fact, it was because she was all too aware of her disgusting nature that she was now panicking. There was no way a dirty creep of a flat-chested fan like herself should ever be allowed to be in the presence of a shining angel of innocent radiance.

There was no way a vile, dirty, low-life creep of a flat-chested fan—who secretly thought those quirks were charming—should be reflected in the eyes of an angel who knew nothing of filth.

Ten days ago, Reliared Silver, the youngest of the family, had returned to the estate after her first semester at Altoire Academy. That night at the dinner table, she had uttered the most shocking words: “Father, Nia will be coming to stay over in two weeks as planned. She has accepted our invitation, so please include her in the work schedule.”

“WHAT?!” Though her aging father was already replying, there was an important implication in her sister’s words that Rikelvita could not ignore. “My precious little Nia is coming?! To this old geezer’s mansion?!”

Said old geezer of the estate, Vikson Silver, was silently looking at his second daughter as if he wanted to say something, but he chose to keep his mouth shut and turned to look at Reliared instead.

“She is, yes. Wait, you didn’t know? I made sure to send father a letter informing him in advance.”

“Father! You told me nothing about this! WAIT! Raffinee, Ririmi, you both knew too?!” For such a dark and gloomy person, Rikelvita was still someone who could desperately raise her voice. She had correctly deduced from their lack of reaction that her older sister, Raffinee, and her other younger sister, Ririmi—who had returned home at the same time as Reliared—already knew of Nia’s planned visit.

Thought through calmly, there was no problem, really. Nia wasn’t coming over in one or two days—she was coming in two weeks. Learning at this time wasn’t last-minute or sudden. She was informed an appropriate amount of time in advance. Yet, the second daughter remained distraught at the news. To her, Vikson said only one thing: “It’s about time that you meet her in person.”

Through magivision, the Silver family and the Liston family were now

connected more than ever. Currently, all of the girls, excluding Rikelvita, had met with the members of the Liston family and made their introductions. Vikson wasn't sure why Rikelvita refused to meet with Nia Liston, but he'd always thought it was an inappropriate attitude for an aristocrat to take.

To him, the facts that his two eldest daughters were late to marriage, that neither of them even had a suitor in mind, and that neither of them seemed to feel any pressure or desire to get married had also felt a little inappropriate for an aristocrat, but he was aware that was an outdated way of thinking, so he had chosen not to pursue it. But as a member of the Silver family, not even greeting a family who had provided so much assistance to them was a disgrace.

The Liston family had provided great assistance when the Silvers founded their own broadcasting station. Even now, they would give advice for recordings or projects. The Silvers absolutely had to make sure they did not slight the Listons in any way.

"We'll be involved with the Liston family quite often in the future, not just with Nia Liston. As a member of the Silver family, you need to at least show them basic courtesy." What was more, Nia Liston was a friend of his youngest daughter, and though she was young, she could be considered a coworker in the field. She would be coming to the Silver Estate as Reliared's friend and would even be participating in some of their own territory's programs.

After confirming with the lord of the Liston family, Ornitt Liston, that Nia would be appearing on the Silvers' programs, he'd received the reply that a reduced pay was fine. In truth, Vikson had initially been surprised at the thought he'd have to pay at all, but in hindsight, that would make things go much smoother for them. He had no doubt they would end up making many requests of Nia during the recordings. The last thing he wanted was for her to think that they were slave drivers asking her to work for free.

In other words, Ornitt Liston's response had actually been the best response Vikson could've asked for.

That had been ten days ago.

"Can you just accept this is happening already?" Raffinee said in exasperation to her younger sister, who was still being crushed under the pressure of Nia

Liston's visit getting closer with each passing moment.

"B-B-B-But! But! There's no way a vile, dirty, cowardly, smelly, low-life creep of a flat-chested fan—who secretly thinks those quirks are charming—should ever enter the view of an angel like Nia who knows nothing of filth!"

Her sister looked at her in confusion. "What? Well...you're not wrong, but still."

"Why would you not refute me?!"

Because no one felt they could deny it. "Oh, so you're actually self-aware," flashed through all of their minds, but no one dared say it. They wouldn't say, "You really are as bad as you look," either. They would swallow down the temptation to say, "You don't just say perverted things, you're *aware* you're a pervert, huh?"

Raffinee sighed. "I'm not father or anything, but I really think you should get it over with and meet with her already. The more you put it off, the harder it'll be later. This visit is only the start of what will likely be a long relationship. I'm pretty sure she'll end up coming to our house again in the future, especially during school vacations. Right, father?"

Vikson saw no reason to deny it, so he nodded. "I would like to use this as an opportunity to begin regularly inviting Nia Liston to our territory. That is why I want to give her the friendliest welcome possible. She has many fans in our domain as well, so I'd love for her to regularly appear on our channel."

Of course, for an appropriate price, he silently added. Naturally, he couldn't say that so blatantly in front of his daughters or his servants. His second daughter was already being far too open with her comments—he didn't need to be revealing even more of their family's ulterior motives. It was a calculated move, but he would likely have Reliared stay over at the Liston Estate on some occasions as well.

In other words, it was a mutually beneficial relationship. Presently, magivision was still far from popular—the Liston family was a fellow promoter of magivision and a comrade. If they tried to get in each other's way or pull the other down or reject acts of goodwill, it would absolutely come back to bite them both later. Nothing would be more foolish than that.

One day, they might end up facing off in a conflict of interest, but right now, it was much more beneficial to accept any and all goodwill aimed at them. In a way, you could say their goal was to expand the magivision industry to such a size that the field could become competitive in the first place. Vikson hoped the day would come that they could have a healthy and dramatic competition.

“Maaaaaaaaaaaaan... Nia’s coming here...”

Rikelvita’s family and servants watched the perverted girl with judgmental eyes as she worried away to herself.

“Young Mistress Reliared, a letter from Young Mistress Nia has arrived.” Just as they had finished breakfast and their dishes were being taken away, a servant walked in and handed an envelope to Reliared.

“From Nia?” Though she was aware it was bad manners, Reliared opened the envelope as soon as she received it—given the timing, she thought it was possible there could’ve been a change in plans. She felt it prudent she checked now while her family was already around the table so she could inform them as soon as possible, especially her father, who had been organizing the schedule in the first place.

The farther down the paper her eyes ran, the more her hands began to shake. She read the same part of the letter over and over and over again. The contents didn’t change no matter how many times she reread it, and yet she continued to do so anyway.

Vikson frowned, seeing his daughter’s reaction. “What’s the matter?” Were the contents that important? Or was it some grave news instead? What if it was a notification of a passing? He couldn’t help but think of how that young girl had previously been on her deathbed before her miraculous recovery.

“He’s...coming.”

“Who? Nia?”

“No! I said *he*! I’m talking about Neal, Nia’s older brother!”

Yes, that was indeed what was written in the letter:

“Brother doesn’t have anything to do, so he’ll be coming with me. If he can’t

stay at your house for whatever reason, then I'll have him stay at a hotel in the city. Either way, he's coming with me."

The day of Neal and Nia Liston's visit was approaching. It was no longer just the Silvers' second daughter—now the youngest daughter was also suspiciously nervous about the event.

And then, the day finally arrived.

Chapter 2: A New Picture Project

We boarded Neal's vintage airship bright and early. The trip to the Silver Estate would take around half a day, meaning we would arrive in the evening. We weren't in a rush, though, so I wasn't bothered by how long it took. So long as it was a leisurely trip, I had no complaints.

Most likely because of the horrifying thirty-seven consecutive recordings that had finally ended the previous morning, the moment we boarded the airship, I went straight to my room and conked right back out again. My body was fine, but I was apparently much more mentally exhausted than I had realized. Anyway, I just wanted to rest more.

Being able to rest to my heart's content truly was the best feeling. I took that precious time to nap, and I woke up around lunch. *I feel much more refreshed now.* I had no idea what I'd be doing at the Silver territories once I arrived, so I thought it best I get my rest in now rather than later. There was always the possibility I would be overrun with work again.

I really was tired, wasn't I? My return home had been followed immediately by a hellish two weeks—it *was* thirty-seven recordings, after all. Thirty-seven recordings in two weeks. What an absolute joke. There was no way *anyone* could pull that off. Well...the fact I had aside, if I had been a regular child, I would've been completely crushed by the workload. Even an adult might not have managed. And to have no qualms about making me go through such a schedule... There were some terrifying adults out there. Especially Bendelio. *I will never forget what he did.*

My hatred for that distinctive face once more blazing in my chest, I exited my room and went onto the deck where Neal and Lynette were training with wooden swords. In fact, Lynokis was there too. She appeared to only be observing, though.

"Ah, Young Mistress. Did you sleep well?" Lynokis asked when she noticed me. I had asked her to take her leave when I went to sleep. The last thing I

wanted was for her to get any funny ideas and sneak into bed with me.

“I slept very well, thank you. I see my brother is doing well.” My gaze was instantly drawn towards Neal. He and Lynette were sparring quite vigorously.

Neal was still only eight years old, and yet he could move so efficiently. He was quite the little gem. If he kept improving as he had been, he might even surpass me one day. *Then again...maybe that'd be asking too much of him.* There was no way the successor of the Liston family could spend his days practicing swordsmanship forever. If he wanted to surpass me, he'd have to focus on training every day for at least thirty years. There was no shortcut to the absolute precipice of martial arts.

“It appears the result of the martial arts tournament lit a fire under him. He apparently often trains while you're out at work.”

Oh, so he is actually putting in the training. Neal had accompanied me on set two or three times at the start, but the moment he'd realized that I was bringing him with me so we could force him into the recordings, he'd stopped coming. *You learned, brother. The moment you go, you're not getting out.*

There are more occasions than this where your actions can have dire consequences. Don't forget, dear brother. There was no doubt in my mind that women would fight over him eventually. There would most definitely be terrible incidents sparked by whom he walked home or whose house he went to visit. Unwitting kindness could lead to disaster.

“Ah, that reminds me. I have a letter for you, Young Mistress.”

“A letter?”

From whom?

“The sender was the Silver family, but your father has already unsealed it and given it a look over. It is a letter detailing your full schedule. All it needs now is your approval.”

As Lynokis had said, the envelope was already unsealed. I opened the letter and saw that it was a list of projects. “The master was aware of just how busy you were the other day and decided it best that he refrain from giving you the letter until after you were done. He felt that it was putting too much on your

plate at once.”

A good call. If I had been made to discuss even more work in the middle of that hellish schedule, I would have probably gone insane and fallen to impulse and instinct, punching Bendelio right in the face.

The proposals on the list with a line through them must have been the ones that my father had rejected. In other words, I was allowed to pick from the ones that were left. *So this is the work I'll be doing in the Silver territories... Hm?*

“Hey, Lynokis. Are dogs *that* popular?” The list of projects had a mix of ones that piqued my interest and ones I couldn't care less about, but one in particular caught my eye. I was curious about it, or at least, it caught my attention.

As my question to Lynokis implied, it was about a dog—specifically, playing tag with a dog. One of our company's planners had mentioned at yesterday's barbecue that the dog project had been well received, but was that really true? If you asked me, it was a match with an incredibly obvious outcome. That said, I had made sure to be uncharacteristically considerate and adjusted my speed to appear as if I only narrowly won.

As much as I enjoyed using my body more than my brain, and though I couldn't do much about the dog being faced with loss, it wasn't good for me to embarrass the owner. After all, those projects only happened because people sent in letters saying their dog was faster. If I won with ease, they would look the fool. This in itself was a way of solidifying my popularity. I wanted to avoid acting in ways that would make potential audiences dislike me. In that case, I would even prefer to lose if it meant not offending them.

Regardless, that exact same dog project was listed on the Silvers' proposal list as well. In fact, there were two. Though the name was different, I had to imagine the contents were the same.

“I wonder. It seemed to do well in the Liston territories, but I naturally am not privy to the ratings in the Silver territories,” Lynokis replied. I should've expected that. Lynokis's range of motion was pretty much limited to my range of motion—if I didn't know, it was unlikely that she did either.

“I think it's fun to watch.” Neal had come over after finishing his training,

sweat wetting his brow. “The dog’s bigger than you, and yet you beat it. It’s both a strange and really funny sight. Right, Lynette?”

“I agree.” Unlike Neal, who looked absolutely exhausted, Lynette looked like she’d barely broken a sweat. “I believe the popularity of the program would only increase the more races you won. If the ratings for the martial arts tournament are any sign, programs that display competitions seem to attract people’s attention more easily.”

I see. Tournaments and competitions grabbed people’s attention, did they? We could maybe use Lynette’s opinion in the future. I’d make sure to tell Hildetaura when we next met.

For the first time in a while, as we floated by the changing scenery, I got to take things slow as I ate my lunch, did some light training, had a little chat with Neal, and discussed the financial situation of the Listons. I looked off into the distance as we soared through the sky, the ocean dyed red by the setting sun, and the faraway floating islands mere specks in the distance, when suddenly, a behemoth known as a Fugaku ray came elegantly floating through the distant sky.

Even just the *tip* of its long tail was the same size as our airship. Never mind hitting us, if it so much as grazed us, we’d be goners—as was expected from an elite monster that you could practically call a soaring island. *I wonder if it’s the same one I knew in my past life. Maybe I can tell if we get up close.*

Our half-day journey across the skies came to an end when we docked in the Silver territories. It was already night by the time we arrived. We were guided by an airship with the Silver crest on the side to the floating island that held the Silver Estate.

“Young Master Neal!”

When we disembarked at the port, two red-haired girls came running over—Reliared and Ririmi. They must have heard we’d arrived and burst out of the mansion to greet us.

“It’s nice to see you again, Reli...a?” Though I went to greet the girl, she swiftly brushed right past me.

“Hello there,” my brother replied. “Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say good evening? It’s been a while, Relia.”

I see, you were after my brother. Just went straight for him. I wasn’t even in her sights.

“Sorry, Nia,” Ririmi immediately apologized, having seen clear as day what had happened. “I’ll make sure to give her a good scolding later.”

I shook my head. “I don’t mind. It’s cute how childish she is.” Children were generally impolite anyway. It’d be more worrisome if they *weren’t* a little naughty.

“Well, yes, but...aren’t you the same age...?”

I understood her response, but despite appearances, I wasn’t a child inside.

“I’m sorry for intruding without waiting for a response, but is it all right for my brother to join me? If not, I can send him off to a hotel.” I’d written in my letter to them that Neal would be joining me, but the correspondence had been one-sided. I hadn’t received a response from the Silvers before we left. Neal had reassured me that if it was an issue, he could stay at a hotel or even go to a friend’s house with his airship.

“Father said it was absolutely fine. We’re greatly indebted to your family, after all.”

Given the Silvers were fifth-class aristocrats, I imagined even two or three extra guests wouldn’t have proved an issue for them.

“Shall we get going now, Relia? Surely we don’t need to talk right here,” I called out to Reliared chatting away with my brother. *Why is she glaring at me?*

“Oh, it’s you, Nia. You came? Wow. Welcome, I guess?” Everything about her, from her voice, to her words, to her face, to her attitude—none of it felt welcoming. Her animosity at my interference was clear as day, though.

“Brother, I’ll tell you plenty of secrets about Relia later. Despite how she looks —”

Reliared changed her tune immediately. “Wait, I’m sorry, Nia, seriously! I’m really sorry. I was just a bit excited, really. I’m sorry. Let’s stay up chatting all

night, okay?”

If she knew her place, all was well. Children being at least this obedient made them easy to work with. It was a relief in its own way.

“I’m glad you arrived safely.”

Our conversation at the docks took more time than I had thought, and it was already pitch-black by the time we made it to the Silvers’ house. The mansion was as large as the Liston Estate, and their garden was also carefully maintained. It was hard to see in the darkness, but it was likely a beautiful sight in the daytime.

When we entered through the doors, a refined middle-aged man was waiting for us. I wasn’t actually sure whether to call him elderly or middle-aged—he was at that weird midpoint—but regardless, this gentleman was an aristocrat of the fifth class and lord of the Silver territories, Vikson Silver. We’d only previously met once, when the broadcasting station opened, so it had been about a year since we’d last seen each other.

This was the first time we’d been to their mansion, since we’d met directly at his broadcasting station originally.

“It’s nice to see you again, Lord Silver. Thank you very much for permitting a visit of only two young children.” As Neal had come with me, it was his responsibility to represent the Liston family in his greeting; he was the successor after all. Though still a child, his greeting was confident. He did very well.

“It’s nice to see you again too, Neal. Think of this as your own home while you’re here. In fact, you’re more than welcome to relax as if you’re at a holiday home.”

A holiday home, huh? That was certainly a welcome idea after the hellish two weeks I’d just survived. Though...technically I *did* still have work to do. Neal would be able to relax all he liked, at least. Playing around was a child’s job after all.

“Thank you for inviting us here, Mr. Vikson. We will be in your care.” I made

my own greeting after Neal. My brother might have been our representative, but that didn't mean I shouldn't also do the same.

"I'm glad to see you again, Nia. There's a lot I'd like to discuss with you."

About work, yes?

"And I, as well." Honestly, I actually wanted to talk about the vacation. *Okay, okay, yes, I know, I need to talk about work. I will. I'll stay patient until the last five days.*

"Oh, hello, you two." Raffinee came out from the back. I hadn't seen her since that recording we'd done shortly before the entrance ceremony. "Sorry I'm late. I only just came back from work, you see."

"No need to worry. Please prioritize your own work before considering us." Naturally, my brother had the perfect polite response for a situation like this too. In fact, if you turned your gaze just slightly, you could already see the Silver family's servants and Reliared captivated by him, their eyes never shifting.

With this, all the Silvers were gathered, since if memory served, the mistress of the household had already passed away. Since they had all come to greet us, we *must* have been welcome.

"Excuse me for asking, but...is Lady Rikelvita unable to be present again?"

Hm? Who was this "Rikelvita" my brother mentioned?

Oh...of course, there was still the second daughter. The eldest was Raffinee, the third was Ririmi, and the youngest was Reliared. Right, the second daughter wasn't present, was she? I had heard her name at the opening ceremony for the broadcasting station even though I hadn't gotten to meet her, but I hadn't had any opportunity to hear her name since then, so I'd completely forgotten about her.

I suppose now is as good a time as any to remind myself of the Silver family tree.

Vikson Silver's wife had passed away around ten years ago. He'd adopted Reliared from a relative, so she was considerably younger than her sisters. Apparently, adoptions weren't anything strange in aristocratic circles, so neither

Reliared nor her sisters paid it much mind. Honestly, the sisters looked so similar that rumors had started to spread that she was actually Vikson's illegitimate child, that they were sisters with a different mother.

At least, so Lynokis had told me after she'd been informed by Reliared's personal attendant. Apparently, they had become friends at some point.

"Rikel, huh..."

Suddenly, Vikson, Raffinee, and Ririmi's faces all turned dark. Reliared was so smitten with Neal that she wasn't even paying attention to the conversation. From their reaction, there must have been some circumstances behind the second daughter's absence—either she was in a state where we couldn't meet her, or she herself didn't want to meet us. Whatever the case, we would be intruding on them for a while, so there was no rush. Quite frankly, there was no reason to force her to meet us if she had a reason she couldn't. It was fine.

"It's almost time for dinner, yes? I'm a little hungry." I took advantage of being a child to dispel the awkward air and freely complained about my empty stomach. Don't get me wrong, though, I really was hungry—starved, even. I had deliberately not eaten so I could get my fill of the Silver territories' renowned pork. I could never forget the taste of that steak I'd had at the opening ceremony. It had been absolutely delicious. *They're going to serve it again, right? Definitely? Don't let me down, Vikson.*

"Ah, yes, you're right. Dinner has been prepared for us. You can go get yourself changed and then come down to the dining room."

Just as I had surmised, tonight's dinner was a course of my long-awaited pork steak. *I'm so glad I came.* It was such a simple pleasure and yet I really had been looking forward to it. It was scrumptious—especially the thin slices that came out with the cold salad. The sauce matched it perfectly. I left conversing with the Silvers to my brother and turned my full attention to savoring the delicious meat. Beef was nice, and I liked fish too, but pork really was something else.

"What do you think, Nia?" Vikson asked while I was enjoying my after-dinner tea. "Did you see the list I sent you? We'd appreciate it if you could appear in many of our programs." He appeared to have been refraining from bringing up work during the meal, but the second we were done, he showed no restraint.

Yes, yes, I'll do whatever you wish me to. I just finished doing thirty-seven recordings over two weeks, but I can still push to do more work. Neal could do whatever he wished, but I hadn't come here to play, after all. Indeed, everything was going exactly as planned.

You'll all be happy if I just do it, right?! Just push myself to my limit, yes?! Well, guess what, I'm doing exactly that!

After a relaxing flight through the skies, I was once more thrust into a life of work at the Silver territories. Thankfully, it appeared they didn't have a crafty little bugger of a manager like Bendelio and his distinctive face, so this schedule actually had breaks. Only two or three shoots a day? They were kind indeed.

Not long ago—more specifically, before I returned home for the summer—I had thought that even just *two* shoots in one day was a lot. Now, it felt like nothing. Working for the Silvers, I would leave in the early morning and make it back in the evening. I began to worry if it was okay that we could wrap up so early. There was still time for us to record, after all.

In hindsight, that was definitely the negative aftereffects of both my body and mind getting used to a fully booked schedule. Bendelio would pay for this. I had no reason to ever forgive what he'd put me through.

But that was that and this was this.

"You take a different approach over here—it's like a different flavor. The recordings here are fun in their own way."

My new routine at the Silver territories began, and before long, four days had already passed. Today was my first recording on this schedule that would involve me staying over at the location. We would be camping outside under the instruction of a trained adventurer.

At the moment, Reliared and I were sitting in chairs underneath the shade of the trees, waiting for recording to begin. Our briefing had finished, and we were now waiting for our late guest to arrive. Everyone around us was busy getting equipment set up, but our work didn't begin until the cameras started rolling. It wasn't good for us to tire ourselves out and get all sweaty right before the recording started. Even if everyone around us was rushing about, remaining still

was our job.

“Wow, it’s different over in the Liston territories?”

“Indeed. Entirely different.”

In our area, much of my work involved interacting with people of varying occupations as part of *Occupation Observation*. The Silver territories put much more emphasis on adventuring programming. As Reliared was still a child, the only programs she could appear in were ones that contained no danger, but the contents of many of the shows she starred in were very interesting: sometimes, she would learn how to wield tools used in dungeons or during explorations, or she would research and then introduce the achievements of famous adventurers or even give sightseeing tours of locations associated with history’s greats.

“Father likes this kind of show, you see. Apparently, he wanted to become an adventurer when he was young.”

I see. He’d wanted to become an adventurer but had given up on his dreams in order to lead the Silver house, hm? And so, with his lingering regrets, he’d decided he wanted to get involved in adventuring in a different form.

“Are the programs you can watch still limited?” Reliared asked me.

“Yes, they are.”

“Does that mean you’ve never watched my *Camp* shows?”

“That is correct.” Lynokis apparently did, but it was always while I was at class or doing homework.

“So mean. At least watch my shows.”

“I would if I could.”

Honestly, her shows were way more up my alley. I really did want to watch her. I couldn’t help but view Reliared as my granddaughter, after all.

Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation had become my signature show. Similarly, Reliared had her own *Reliared’s One-Day Camp*. They would invite various adventurers on as guests and chat with them about their lives while making and eating their specialty camp food. The camping format made it seem

as if they could only record one episode a day, but in reality, they would often save time by having a different guest at a location not too far off from the other shoot, and they would go back and forth to record two episodes at once. Sometimes, they wouldn't even actually stay over for the night.

I totally understood. Of course you would have two shoots going simultaneously in a situation like that. Hell, I had literally just been doing five at once on a tight schedule that went down to the second. I'd go to and from different locations so we could record them both at once. I'd thought I was going to die.

Reliared continued to pout. "I watch so many of your shows too."

I really am sorry. I do want to watch, but Lynokis's surveillance is so strict. Maybe it was about time I seriously approached the topic of having my magivision limitations lifted again. But then again, this body was still only six years old. It was an age that made sense to have parental restrictions. It was a difficult thing to try and refute.

"Mr. Kurtlich has arrived!"

Oh, he was finally here. Reliared and I stood from our seats and headed towards our guest.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Kurtlich."

"My name is Nia. I will be accompanying Reliared in today's recording. It is a pleasure to meet you."

After giving our introductions to the large man who looked exactly like your typical adventurer, the recording for the day began.

It turned out that Kurtlich was quite the quiet man, making the recording rather bland as he softly recounted his stories. Apparently, for programs in the Silver territories, that sufficed. There were both cheerful adventurers and those who were more serious and somber, like Kurtlich. Displaying the various kinds of adventurers born from a world that was as cruel as it was kind was how the Silver Broadcasting Station chose to do things.

If this had been done in the Liston territories, we would almost certainly have tried to spice it up somehow. Bendelio didn't like it when our shows were too

plain.

“Sorry. It must be boring talking with someone like me.”

We had finished recording the three of us making some camp food and giving it a taste test—that would be all for the day. Now that the cameras were off, Kurtlich could finally relax as he sat across from us around the campfire. It hadn’t shown on his face, but he must have been more nervous than I thought.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re not really looking for excitement on this kind of show.” Reliared, still in work mode, reassured him with a model answer.

“I wanted to hear more about your work, if I’m honest. Not like this chance comes every day.”

“Nia.” Reliared immediately stepped in to reprimand me.

Now just hold on a second.

“It’s not my place to criticize how a different territory does their work, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to be overly considerate. Mr. Kurtlich responding to your call means he came here with the intent to tell his stories, no?” That was why it was important to help drag those stories out of him. Though...I didn’t dislike this quiet and laid-back camping atmosphere. In fact, it was the first time I had experienced it in this life. I thought it inappropriate to ruin it with pointless chatter.

But we had come here for work, and that meant we had a job to do. All of us did.

“But...” Reliared glanced at Kurtlich. Deep inside, she seemed to have the same opinion as me, at least. *Perhaps I should help give a little push?*

“What do you think, Mr. Kurtlich? Do you wish to talk more?” I asked directly.

“Of course. That’s why I was called here, after all. I’ve been paid, and I’d love to talk more, but... Sorry, I’m not very good at conversation. I’m not sure where to start.” This *was* a start, though. “I’ve seen magivision before, but I don’t have anything worth talking to people about or any fun stories. In truth, I’m not even sure why I was asked to appear on this program in the first place. I still came because the broadcasting station was insistent, but I can’t help but feel like

maybe...this isn't quite for me."

That! That was perfectly fine. That was exactly what should've been said in front of the cameras. That was a topic. That would become the *cue* for a topic. Conversation flowed by connecting one topic to another.

"Then it's okay for us to ask questions? It won't cause you any trouble?" Reliared's tone of voice had become more cheerful, and Kurtlich nodded enthusiastically. I turned to the director, who had been watching from nearby, and twirled my finger at them.

Roll cameras.

The production crew back home would understand the hand sign, but would the one here...? *Ah, thank goodness, it seems they got it.* Honestly, it seemed they had already had the same idea before I'd even sent the signal. Whether they could use this footage would depend on if Kurtlich gave them the okay when they told him they'd secretly been recording the conversation, but there was no way they could simply ignore this.

If Kurtlich wanted to talk, then it wouldn't hurt to try digging into the more personal topics.

"Could you tell us about the first time you explored a dungeon?"

"Of course. I think I was about...fourteen years old at the time? I know I give off a rougher impression, but I'm actually quite cautious. I decided I should learn all the ABCs of being an adventurer before doing anything, so I bought..."

The occasional crackling of the firewood, and the wavering firelight dispelling the darkness accompanied the low rumble of the man's voice until late into the night, our hearts warmed by that gentle atmosphere.



“It was fun.”

After that overnight campout, we returned to the Silver Estate the next morning.

“Really? I wish I could’ve come with you.”

Upon finishing breakfast, I recounted the events of the recording to my brother, since he was essentially responsible for me while we were here. As for what Neal had been doing, he’d recently been spending a lot of time training with Ririmi.

“And I wish you could’ve come with me too.”

“Relia would have gotten distracted if I were there, I’m sure.”

That was clearly an excuse. Neal had learned over the first half of this summer vacation that the moment he accompanied me to a shoot, there was no escape for him. Every time the suggestion of him coming with me was raised, he would refuse it as vehemently as possible. I had to start thinking of ways to trick my brother into joining me... Still, he wasn’t wrong that Relia would most certainly have been distracted if he had been present, so I supposed it wasn’t *entirely* an excuse.

And so, a week of us intruding on the Silvers passed in a flash. My schedule had been quite full, but it began calming down enough that I could relax in the mornings. With my newfound time, I decided to accompany Ririmi and Neal to their training session in the gardens with Lynokis.

“N-No way...”

“Is that enough for you?”

“No, of course I’m gonna continue!”

It seemed Ririmi wanted to continue sparring with Lynokis. *Ririmi’s not bad, but she’s definitely got a long way to go.* Lynokis had been calm the whole time she took the young girl on, surprising her opponent with her strength. Ririmi probably realized by now that my attendant was even stronger than Gandolph, her Heavenstriker instructor.

If we were to really look at our situation, though, Gandolph was essentially *my* student. He even preferred to call me “Master.” Take it further and he was my second student after Lynokis. It wasn’t all that strange for the first student to be stronger than the second.

Incidentally, I was fairly certain that Reliared’s tall attendant, Esuella, had acquired the ability of chi manipulation. If she hadn’t already acquired it, she was at least close to achieving it. That was why I personally thought she was likely stronger than Gandolph as well. Unless she showed off her full strength, though, there was no way to know for sure.

Reliared was also walking the martial way, but she was still a rookie. What’s more, if Neal was present, she got so easily distracted that she could barely train, so for now she was training elsewhere with Esuella.

My observations aside, the aftereffects of that horrific string of thirty-seven recordings and adjusting to recording in a new place meant that I had been slacking on both my and Lynokis’s training. I really wanted the opportunity to get a proper session in.

Summer vacation was around a month and a half—more specifically, around forty days. We were required to be back in the dorms the day before the next semester started. Given I had my work schedule to think about, though, my own plans were quite rough at the moment. We believed, at the earliest, we would be able to get back two or three days before.

Our last five days away from the capital would be spent on one of the Altoire royal family’s private islands at the arrangement of Hildetaura, but since she had her own work schedule to contend with, even she hadn’t determined a final schedule. Though she had guaranteed she would have five days to take that break at some point, the exact date and time was yet to be decided—worst-case scenario, we might not actually get the full five days.

I would be spending a few more days at the Silver Estate, and then I would be headed for the capital. This time, I would be doing recordings for the capital’s broadcasting station with Hildetaura. And then, the last five days after we finished our work, we would finally be going on that vacation to the floating island.

Now that I think about it, I'm leaving to go do even more work. This may seem a bit too self-aware, but am I not working a bit much? There were large expectations for the promotion of magivision, but even still, this amount of work felt a little...

"Hm?"

Suddenly, I felt someone's eyes on me and turned around. And right there, dashing behind some plants, was a woman. She was so slow at hiding that I saw her clear as day. Not just that, but her dress was sticking out from where she crouched. Was she...trying to hide? Was she hoping I would catch her? Was she waiting for me to call out to her?

I had seen her here and there during my time at the Silver Estate, but who even was she? Well, I could make a guess, at least. An unfamiliar girl wearing a dress at an aristocrat's place couldn't be a servant—and that meant she had to be a member of the Silver family.

Regardless, until I knew how she wanted me to act, I was unable to respond. Given it was only Neal and me staying over, there were no adults around to smooth things over for me if I made a mistake. I couldn't just put that burden on Neal all the time either. Even though I knew Vikson Silver was not the type of man to get angry at these kinds of social slights, that didn't matter; it still wasn't good for me to cause trouble while I was here.

What was the correct way to act in this situation as a member of the Liston family? Should I continue to wait, or...?

"Heeeh, heeeh..." Her breathing was erratic, and her legs were shaking. It didn't help that she had always been such a nervous person. "I-I can't do this...anymore..."

Rikelvita, the second daughter of the Silver family, was trying her best in her own way. She was a vile, dirty, cowardly, smelly-looking creep of a flat-chested fan—who secretly thought those quirks were charming—who despised the sun and hadn't been outside in days, but she was trying her best in her own way.

Nia and Neal, the Liston children she was a massive fan of, had come to their house.

Rikelvita would've been happy with just one of them coming along, but both together? She wasn't even sure what to compare her current happiness to. This was unmistakably the biggest event she'd experienced in the past few years. The last time her heart had been beating this frantically and her palms sweating so abnormally had been when she'd collapsed in elementary school after being subjected to moderate exercise.

Ever since those two children had arrived, Rikelvita had been doing her best. In order to cause no offense, she had worn the trendy dress that her older sister had designed for her, had asked her attendant to put on appropriate makeup for her, had styled her usually messy red hair, and of course, had made sure to go for a bath before putting on the clothes. She'd pushed and pushed and pushed herself, forcefully putting on a presentable front even greater than what she had hidden inside. She'd taken a whole week to build up that image.

And yet, she couldn't take the last step.

On the first day, she'd gotten ready, but then she had to wait anxiously for over half a day for them to arrive. So by the time they had, she'd been so tired she couldn't do anything.

On the second day, she'd tried to join them for breakfast, but then she'd gotten hit with a mysterious stomachache and ended up resting in bed instead.

On the third day... Well, a lot had happened. And suddenly, a whole week had passed. Over that week, Rikelvita had been hovering nearby, waiting for a good opportunity to go out and introduce herself to the siblings, but she had failed to take that step out every time.

Ever since she was small, she'd loved drawing but was terrible at interacting with people. She could only speak properly with family she was used to or the attendants who were close to her. That personality had led to her becoming obsessed with drawing as a way to escape human interaction, and that was what had led to her being the recluse she was today. When she'd graduated from middle school, she'd holed herself up at home and focused purely on art. She was quite happy with her current lifestyle, though it could be a little monotonous.

Two years ago, magivision had appeared in her life and changed everything.

She could see places far away, watch plays, and even hear about famous people, all from the comfort of her own home. Rikelvita the recluse was completely enraptured by magivision—and that had led to her fateful introduction to Nia Liston, the girl who'd recovered from her deathbed. She liked Hildetaura too, but Nia had looked so frail the first time Rikelvita saw her that she had been too worried to take her eyes off the crystal screen.

That had been the beginning of it all, and at some point, it had become the highlight of Rikelvita's day to watch the perfectly healthy Nia on magivision.

So, when all was said and done, Rikelvita was a fan.

They were both girls, so she didn't want to do all of those kinds of things you would do with the opposite sex, but she did want to draw her nude. That ulterior motive most certainly existed; there was no denying that. That was why she would get worked up and imagine Nia naked. She wanted to see a young girl's naked body. Rikelvita was simply a girl of the arts.

As a member of the fifth-class Silver family, she had to make her introductions. The other party was of the fourth-class Liston family—she couldn't get away with not doing at least that bare minimum. Rikelvita knew that.

That was why she was trying her best.

The Silvers were all aware that she was trying her best. They understood that she was shy and timid—which was why they felt they couldn't push her too hard. Honestly speaking, the girl herself was quite content even having gotten to see Nia and Neal in the flesh from up close. Perhaps the reason she couldn't take that final step even though she had mentally prepared herself was because she'd already gotten her own satisfaction.

"I...did my best today too." Any more today was impossible for her. Her pulse was insane, her heart felt like it was about to burst, and she was worried that she was sweating too much. Her hands were already soaking. Her body wasn't in a state that could possibly appear in front of two innocent young children anymore. Her body was dirty. She had lost what little cleanliness she had cultivated. With that assessment, she chose to go back to her room.

Rikelvita really did want to introduce herself as a member of the Silver family,

as her father and Raffinee had told her to, but for such a severe shut-in, it was too large of a step.

“Hello there.”

Rikelvita froze.

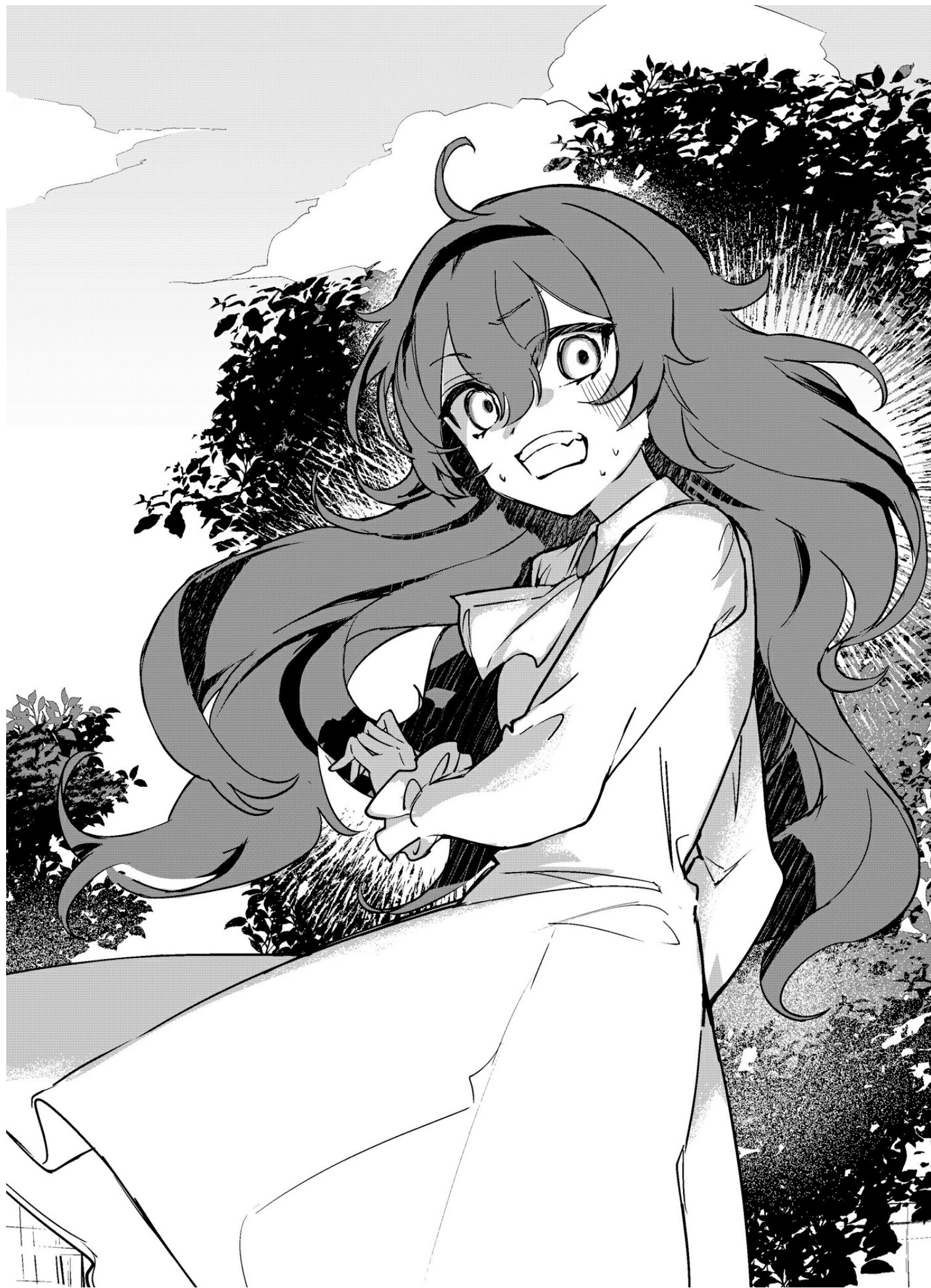
Right in the direction that she had turned to try and escape was the young girl with the white hair that she had been so passionately staring at moments ago. Those clear, blue eyes were looking right at the dirty woman even though she had been on the other side of the brush only a few seconds ago. Why was she suddenly here? Before she could spit out that entirely natural question, all that came out of Rikelvita’s mouth was a simple “Hee!”

“Hee?”

“HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!”

A long scream rang out over the Silver territories.

It was an incredible scream. It was a piercing scream filled with deep emotion. The expression on this girl’s face as she howled to the heavens was a ghoulish one, the whites of her eyes showing.



Neal, Ririmi, and Lynokis, who had been training nearby; Reliared and her attendant, who had been training elsewhere; and all the Silver family servants gathered around us. When they saw the red-haired girl curled up on the ground, trembling in fear, the only ones who didn't make an uncomfortable face were Neal and Lynokis.

Those expressions were more than familiar: it was the exact face that Vikson had made when Neal mentioned Rikelvita. Reliared and Ririmi's expressions were identical to it. For better or for worse, Vikson and Raffinee were actually away for work at the moment.

I...guess I made the wrong choice. I shouldn't have tried to greet her after all. Or I should've at least knocked her unconscious before she screamed. But I didn't feel good at the prospect of raising a hand to a girl whose identity I didn't know for sure.

All of us were standing around unsure of what to do—the servants who weren't able to find the words because they knew what must have happened, the screaming girl who was still trembling with her back to me, and me, unable to say anything because I was the outsider who wasn't even sure what was going on.

"All right, go back to what you were doing! Nothing happened here!" Ririmi bravely and boldly called out. "Nia, Neal, neither of you saw anything, right?" All we could do was nod in response.

In reality, all that had happened was that I had decided to try starting the conversation since I had assumed she was a bit shy. Just a single hello had led to all of this, but I really didn't want to start a fight or anything. I didn't intend for things to turn out this way either.

"Now that we're here, I'll make sure she gives a proper greeting. Just give me some time."

Even I could tell that screaming at a guest and rejecting them after simply saying hello would mar an aristocrat's name. That was why Ririmi was trying to silence everyone on the matter. She was going to try and have a do-over, so we should forget what just happened.

“Nia, it’s a bit early, but let’s head back and take a bath.” Reliared forcefully tugged at my hand. *Isn’t it really early, though? I just started training. I wanted to watch Lynokis flounder...* I thought all of those thoughts in my head, but this was definitely a time I needed to listen to Reliared.

“Then perhaps I will, as well,” Neal said, having decided to do the same. That was definitely the right call here.

“Wait, together...?” Reliared let out. From the heat in her voice and the breath that escaped her, she was almost certainly imagining the two of them bathing together.

He’s not going to join you in the bath, you know. Because I’d made sure to teach him properly that there are things you can’t escape from once you do them.

Starting over again...

“It’s nice to meet you, Lady Rikelvita. My name is Neal Liston.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Rikelvita. My name is Nia Liston.”

We’re the siblings of the Liston family. Though the soul of the sister’s a little different.

After we’d all bathed, we’d sat out at a table set up in the garden and partaken in some tea, before then being called to the Silvers’ parlor—and so we started from square one with Rikelvita. This time, we were able to give proper introductions with the red-haired girl only trembling from nervousness.

“I-I-I-I’m...R-R-R-R-Rikel. Sorry ’bout earlier...” The girl timidly sat in the chair, absolutely exuding anxiety. Even her speech was filled with stammering. Her eyes were swimming all over the place, and she was so nervous that she almost came across as suspicious... But she was a petite and adorable young lady. The simple dress that she wore suited her.

Though their shades varied, the daughters of the Silver family all had red hair and gray eyes. You would assume without being told that they were siblings. Thinking about it, Reliared wasn’t immediately related to them, was she? And yet she looked exactly like them.

Rikelvita was the second daughter, so she would be older than Ririmi standing beside her, but she was so small and her face so young that she looked as if she were the same age if not even younger. So this was the second daughter. She was...extremely flustered by social situations, wasn't she?

"Sorry the introduction came so late. As you can see, she's...quite shy around people. She doesn't like talking to strangers very much," Ririmi explained.

"Does that mean she's all right with family?" I asked.

Ririmi nodded. "Yes, well... I suppose it's more accurate to say that she's not actually able to talk properly with anyone *but* family..."

Hm, I see. In that case, she was one of those types.

"Miss Rikelvita, you came to see my debut stage show, didn't you? *The Girl Who Fell in Love*."

Reliared had told me something to that effect soon after we started school—something about Rikelvita and her father having gone to watch me onstage...and that Reliared herself *definitely* didn't go with them. That was the only time I'd heard about the second daughter. Or, no, I must have heard about her at the opening of the broadcasting station, as well. That was about it, though. If she was fine with family, then the story of her coming to watch me was likely true.

At the end of the day, I was also a member of the Liston family—the bare minimum expectation was that I'd act like an aristocrat. I *think* I played that part pretty well. Probably.

"Thank you ever so much for coming. Did you enjoy the show?" I wasn't sure what exactly had attracted her enough to go all that way to see me in person, but there was no denying she'd done just that. Seeing how she was now, that trip to the capital must have put her under great stress.

"Y-Y-Yeah..." Although quite unrefined, her young face seemed to become younger as she smiled. "Th-The first time seeing little Nia in the flesh was, heh heh heh, so good...!"

Um...

“That’s enough for today, I think!”

That passionate gaze being directed at me felt evil and dirty, like there was some hidden ulterior motive, but Ririmi leaped into our line of sight and interrupted us. I would just believe my eyes had deceived me then. Though, uh...we had met eyes so directly that it was hard to write that look off as a misunderstanding...

I wasn’t quite sure what kind of girl Rikelvita was, but I could start to understand the reason behind the Silver family’s earlier uncomfortable expressions.

“I’ve heard you already had the chance to meet, but once more, this is my second daughter, Rikelvita.”

The commotion with Rikelvita had made our whole morning a mess, but we met her again at dinner. After returning home from his afternoon recording, Vikson joined us at the dinner table and gave a proper introduction for the girl.

“N-Nice to meetcha...after this morning... Keh heh...” Rikelvita was finally able to formally give her greetings. Though her polite smile was painfully forced.

“Once more, my name is Neal Liston.”

“And I am Nia Liston. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Despite his age, my brother always gave such refined greetings. I made sure to follow up with my own.

“My apologies for the delay in introduction. As you can see, she’s quite the shy girl... If I had forced her out, it would have been quite awkward for the both of you, no? So I felt I should let her come out when she felt ready, but...”

“Then everything went as you planned. Lady Rikelvita chose to come find us herself, after all.” Of course my brother had the words ready to ease the man’s guilt.

Rikelvita really had come to greet us herself—that wasn’t a lie. Though she had never quite stepped out to meet us directly, I had technically seen her numerous times since coming to the mansion, as she had been constantly

peeking out and then hiding again.

What had happened today wasn't really that big of a deal either. We'd just maybe had a slight little incident where I might have kind of given her a bit of a fright that was so slight that it was like a light feather... Yes, so very, very light that it was like its weight never even existed. In other words, there was no problem at all! It already felt as if nothing had ever happened.

More importantly, this marked the first time all of the Silver family had been gathered in our presence: the current lord of the Silver family, Vikson Silver; the eldest daughter, Raffinee; the second daughter, Rikelvita; the third daughter, Ririmi; and finally, the one I was most acquainted with, the youngest daughter, Reliared.

Given I would be leaving for the capital in only a few days, I couldn't say whether this was good or bad timing for us to have only met now, but considering we would likely be friends for a long time to come, there was nothing to lose by having met already. I was sure that we would be making numerous visits to the Silver Estate in the future, and perhaps we'd stay over on some occasions as well.

But the question remained: was it necessary for us to further our relationship? Rikelvita was so shy that even now, she was forcing a polite smile on her face. What exactly was the correct distance for me to remain from her? Or should I just make every effort to stay away?

"Ah, I know," Vikson started, trying to dispel the awkwardness. "Rikel is actually a talented artist. She's always holed up in her room drawing away. Why not take a look?"

Well, being invited like that, I had little choice. I didn't think having someone else initiating our relationship would change matters, but...did Rikelvita even *want* to be friends? Was refusing the better option here?

"Heh heh? F-Father, that's embarrassing..." That was what she said, but from the way she was squirming, she looked like she wanted me to see her art, despite her visible embarrassment. Almost definitely. I could kind of tell from her words and behavior that she wasn't completely rejecting me.

The problem now lay in what I *should* do. Should I refrain, or should I simply

go with the flow? Given I'd been screamed at by this girl just this morning, it was impossible to *not* attempt to be as considerate as possible.

"Yes, of course. If it is of no trouble, we would love to see her art."

That boy didn't even hesitate. Neal gave the perfect response as befitting of his status, so I had no way to refuse anymore. I had to go whether I wanted to or not.

Well, whatever. It wasn't as if Rikelvita seemed to be against it. I was sure I would learn in due time how to handle the girl.

To spoil the conclusion to all of this, this invitation would open the door to a completely new magivision project.

After we finished eating dinner, Neal, Rikelvita, her sisters—who were no doubt exceedingly worried for a number of reasons—some of the servants of the house, and I went to take a look at Rikelvita's room.

We were immediately assaulted by the sharp smell of paint. Canvases and easels were haphazardly scattered everywhere in the dimly lit room. When the light was turned on, I immediately realized that this wasn't her bedroom but purely a place to draw—all the room contained was a table, chair, and painting tools. It was like a studio of sorts.

"Wow, this is incredible..." Neal breathed out in wonder. I wasn't all that knowledgeable on the visual arts, but to my brother—who seemed to have an eye for art—many of the pictures were captivating.

I...really wasn't the audience for this. I could tell what I was looking at in landscapes or portraits, but I had no idea what to make of her more abstract work. There were some where she took a model of some kind and drew it with a different theme based on whatever image her mind extracted from it. Those were the ones I found especially baffling.

Well, it wasn't like I couldn't see anything at all in them. *This is a seahorse, right? No? It's...an elderly man with a staff?! This?! Not a seahorse?! Which part is the old man and which part is the seahorse? Ah, wait, I just established there's no seahorse...* Yeah, I definitely couldn't parse it. It was a difficult piece of art in which I could see nothing other than the seahorse.

“I don’t really get them either,” Reliared reassured me. “I can tell that there’s a lot of artistic skill on display, though.”

So Reliared had the same opinion as me. *Right? This looks like a seahorse, right? No? A...croissant? Huh, a croissant?! What about this looks like a croissant?! Does that muscle around the seahorse’s head look anything like a croissant to you?! This is absolutely a seahorse! Uh, but, wait, it’s not a seahorse... It’s meant to be an old man with a staff. Right.* Well, to summarize, it was an old man who looked like a seahorse. Maybe an old man who looked like an *old* seahorse.

“This is also beautiful...”

“It is. Maybe I should see if she’d let me have some of her art again...”

Neal and Raffinee were looking at each of the pieces the servants had carefully lined up, marveling at each one they saw. Was this what they called a difference in taste? That was a cow, right? What? No? I knew it. I knew that even though it looked like a cow, there was no way it actually was. It was something in the *shape* of a cow, right? No, no, I understood now. I had at least that much artistic sense.

“Um, Nia, here.” As Reliared, Ririmi, and I remained unable to comprehend the pictures, Rikelvita came over with a pile of paper that she appeared to use for sketches.

“Well, I certainly know what this is, at least.”

It was me. The monochrome picture that emerged from the overlap of charcoal lines was my face. It was nothing short of a living picture, so detailed, as if a magivision image had been cut out of the MagiPad, and yet also containing warmth that magivision couldn’t quite capture, as well.

“I have...one of you too, Relia.”

“Oh... This is amazing.”

Every drawing in that pile was a portrait. My brother and I were part of the collection, but the majority were of family or servants of the Silver house. *Hang on, there’s even one of Bendelio here.* His distinctive face was so perfectly recreated I could feel my anger reigniting.

Seeing more realistic art like this meant that even I could clearly see how skilled Rikelvita was as an artist.

“So you draw in this style too,” Ririmi breathed out, clearly impressed.

“Yeah, sometimes... I don’t really get many chances to show them to you, though...”

It seemed that Ririmi spending most of her time at the dorms had prevented the sisters from getting enough time to talk.

“Now that I think about it, didn’t you make picture books and little paper plays for me when I was younger?”

“Yeah...” Rikelvita’s smile was somewhat sad. “You really loved playing outside, and...then you started really getting into martial arts, so you got bored of them really fast... Actually, I don’t think you ever really looked at them properly...”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“I thought...maybe you hated me...and got really sad...and then I wanted to go outside less and less...”

“I-I’m really sorry! Honest!”

Hang on...

“Nia!” Reliared suddenly called out. “Let’s go look at that weird picture over there that looks like a pastry!” She was clearly wanting to pull me away from the sudden sisterly spat, but my mind was elsewhere.

“Picture books and paper plays...” I fell into thought.

Magivision programs were recordings of real events. In other words, we could only record events actually happening in front of us. Sounds could be added in postproduction, but the same couldn’t be said for the visuals.

In that case, why not use art?

If we used art, we could turn events that weren’t presently happening into programs. It held none of the risks of our usual recordings either: having to constantly take the weather into account, having the schedule or performance

affected by the actors' mood or physical condition, or having recordings postponed due to unforeseen troubles. It would be possible to record indoors, in an undisturbed environment, without any disruptions to the schedule.

Plus, if we were using art, we could even turn more fantastical events into pictures. For example, maybe we could show a historic battle between some renowned hero and an elite monster. Could that not be one of magivision's many possibilities?

Art. Picture books. Paper plays.

We can work with this.

I would have to consult with Hildetaura first, though. Or perhaps it would be smarter for me to contact Bendelio first. Was it a project we should do in the Liston territories? Could I tempt Rikelvita to participate? There was no denying her artistic ability. If we managed to normalize art recordings in the magivision industry, someone of her skill would be invaluable. I very much wanted to secure her before someone else got their hands on her.

"Ah, Nia." When I didn't move after she pulled on my hand, Reliared peered into my face—and then suddenly realized what had kept me there. "You were just thinking about how we could use art for magivision, weren't you?"

What?! She figured me out?! If I let even the tiniest bit of information slip, the Silver family will almost undoubtedly steal this from me!

"Hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah! I have no idea what you're talking about, none at all! Can you give me your hand for a moment?"

"Wait, are you about to— Ow ow ow ow ow!"

Avoid the subject! Get her to forget about it! Get over this hurdle!

"Nia, what are you doing?!"

"Look at this hand, brother. Isn't it just the most adorable hand you've ever seen?"

"OWWWWWW!"

I held Reliared's hand out to Neal, squeezing it tight, pulling forth all strength from my elbow to my wrist, from my wrist to my fingers, practically strangling

her limb, but I couldn't fool him.

"Stop that right now! You're hurting her! Let her go— Wh-What?! What is this strength? I... I can't loosen your grip at all!"

In the end, I was scolded by my brother.

"Oh? Using art in magivision? So a little like a paper play?"

And at breakfast the next morning, I had my sudden revelation completely stolen by Vikson.

"That sounds interesting indeed. I had been considering if there was some way we could turn the stories of great adventurers and their journeys into an actual program, and expressing them through art would most certainly be an option. That way, we wouldn't have to endanger ourselves by doing something like a live reenactment."

He turned that revelation into an actual practical idea.

"What do you think, Rikel? Sound like something you'd want to give a try? Instead of selling art to royalty or aristocrats, you'd be making art for the general public to consume. That sounds like the perfect opportunity to get your name out there."

"Yeah, I don't really mind... I like all kinds of art..."

And on top of all of that, he took Rikelvita before I even had her within my grasp.

At breakfast the morning after we went to Rikelvita's studio, Reliared proudly told on me to Vikson Silver, and that was all she wrote. Imagine a relay race where the first runner is completely overtaken by five people and they suffer a complete defeat without getting to show off even once—that was what this was like.

Things refused to go the way I wanted them to. Were we to compete in matters of *strength*, I would win so easily, even in this body. But in everything else, I kept losing. Even to Bendelio. It was so *frustrating*.

The world was not so simple that I could solve everything with my fists—though I felt as if the world of my past life *had* been that simple... Whatever. If

I'd taken a second to think about it, I'd have realized that there was no chance of me winning from the start. I'd come up with the idea at the worst time, and Rikelvita was literally a member of the Silvers; stealing her talent for the Listons would've been tough no matter what.

On top of all that, since the Silvers were involved in the magivision industry, they must have invested a notable sum of money—and they'd joined the race very recently. The moment they thought of a new possibility, they would absolutely try to make it a reality, make it their own.

I suppose I will accept this loss. Rather than dwell on it, it would be much more productive for me to change my thinking. Jumping onto a trend only after someone else—namely the Silver Channel in this case—would give you the opportunity to observe the quality, trends, and ratings first, which wasn't a bad tactic in and of itself. It was essentially making someone else traverse through unknown territory first.

Starting late had its own advantages. If they failed, then that was that, and we'd find something else. If they succeeded, we would simply hop on the path of success that the trailblazers had created.

For now, I would inform Bendelio to continue monitoring the Silvers' movements, and also begin searching for a suitable artist.

The development of a new idea had instantly made the Silver family busy.

"Sorry, everyone suddenly ended up swamped with work..."

Amid all of that, I completed my work schedule in their territory and was ready to set off for the capital—and yet, the Silvers dispersed immediately after giving us their brief farewells. They left us alone and instead all boarded their own nearby airship and headed off to work. Even Rikelvita had been dragged along with them.

They at least saw us off to the docks, but I was fairly sure that was only because they were already going there anyway. Only Reliared and Esuella had remained behind, and both looked incredibly awkward about the whole affair.

"Tell Mr. Vikson that we don't mind. Anyone could see that he's busy," Neal

reassured them.

Vikson Silver was clearly in a fair hurry to get the paper play project up and running. If they really buckled down, we might even be able to see it at the tail end of summer vacation.

“See you later, Relia.” I knew Reliared was busy herself, so it was only right that we left as soon as possible.

“See you. I’m looking forward to spending time with you and Miss Hilde on the island. At least...I hope we still can.”

There had originally been a chance for Reliared to join us on our visit to the capital, but now that this whole paper play plan had been decided on, that had gone out the window. We had planned to work together there, and then we’d all go to spend our last five days on the private island together...but with the situation being what it was now, Reliared would only be getting busier.

With all of that out of the way, we boarded Neal’s airship and left the bustling Silver territories.

“I’m glad you arrived safely, Nia.”

Early the next morning, we arrived at the capital. The Altoire production crew was waiting for us when we disembarked.

At the front of the pack, waiting to greet us, was a tall, slender woman in her late twenties who looked awfully uptight. She wore a black suit and trousers that matched her black hair and glasses with thick black frames over deep blue eyes. This lady was Mirko Tair, representative of the Altoire Broadcasting Station. We’d met when I went to introduce myself shortly before summer vacation began.

By representative, I meant that she was essentially Altoire’s Bendelio—the current director of the production crew. I had fulfilled many contracts for work in the capital, but I didn’t cross paths with Mirko until Hildetaura took us to meet everyone at the station. I wasn’t sure if it was because she didn’t often go on-site, or if she just happened to not be present for my recordings. Regardless, I had met her through Hildetaura’s introduction. If Hildetaura trusted her, then I

did too.

“Apologies for springing this on you, but are you available to do a recording right now?”

Wow, absolutely no hesitation. We had made arrangements to meet, so we had adjusted our travel time accordingly, but I hadn’t thought I’d be thrust into work right off the bat.

“Of course. Let’s go.”

Not that that would change my response.

“Please look after my sister,” Neal said.

“We will. Let us have formal introductions tomorrow, when we have more free time.” After exchanging some quick words with my brother, Mirko dragged me away to a nearby airship. I would separate from Neal here, bringing only Lynokis with me.

“Sorry for the rush. If we’re fast enough, you’ll be able to meet up with Hilde in time for her recording,” Mirko said as the airship took off.

“I originally came here for work, anyway, so I don’t mind.” All it took was remembering those two weeks from hell, and something like this felt like child’s play. Neal waved at us as we took off, and I waved back, before turning back around. “So what do you want me to do once we arrive?”

“Race with some dogs.”

Oh... Specials that involved me playing with dogs really were popular, huh? Combining my work from all the territories, I had recorded at least ten dog-related programs by this point.

“Two recordings with dogs. Four, if possible.”

Excuse me? *Four*? Bendelio’s schedule had been bad enough; don’t tell me Mirko would turn out to be as much of a slave driver?

Chapter 3: Capital Business

“Nia!”

“It’s nice to see you again, Hilde.”

I was able to meet with the third princess of Altoire, Hildetaura, at the floating island that Mirko took me to. The airship we had been riding on docked next to another airship that had arrived ahead of us, and the princess herself was waiting for me as I stepped off. Because of her status, she had a few plainclothes bodyguards surrounding her—probably knights, if I were to hazard a guess. But none of them looked all that strong.

That aside, though I hadn’t seen her for about a month, Hildetaura still looked as healthy as a child should.

“This is a new look,” I remarked. The red dots in the center of her green eyes that served as proof of her royal lineage were the same as always, but her hairstyle and clothes were very different. Her long blonde hair was up in a bun, and she was wearing cute pink overalls. With her Wellington boots and her thick gloves, she looked prepared for outdoor work.

I had only ever seen Hildetaura in more proper attire before now, given that she was a princess from a long line of royalty, but since she still was a child, this sort of activewear suited her. In fact, she was basically wearing the same clothes as me—all that was different was the color—so she’d probably done her best to make us match.

“I will be helping out with some farmwork. You will be joining me, yes?”

“Of course, as you can see.” I was, after all, wearing almost exactly the same outfit as Hildetaura currently was. I was ready and raring to go.

The island was small. Very few families lived there, and there were only about a dozen people taking care of the farms and fields.

Each floating island had its own unique ecosystem. Years ago, the infamous

elite monster Vikeranda, in his rampage, had shattered the continent that sat in the sea, resulting in the creation of several floating islands. Rapidly changing atmospheric pressure, climate, wind, sun and moon exposure, as well as other changes in the surrounding environment, had resulted in the creation of new ecosystems on each island.

This island had become a prime location for growing vegetables and grains as well as caring for livestock.

I'd once gone to a farm on a floating island near the capital and had the pleasure of partaking in premium beef favored by the upper classes, made from the meat of the Mooamoora cows raised there. The surprise I'd felt at how different the beef tasted based on the environment it had been raised in was still fresh in my memory. Of course, it wasn't all thanks to the environment—it was also the result of the tireless efforts of the farmers themselves.

After doing some farmwork and clearing out the barns, we had a break. We washed our hands, took shelter under the shade of the trees, and spoke about our schedule as we rested.

"Isn't this a little different from the work you usually do?" I was fairly sure Hildetaura had never done a recording like this before. Her work mainly consisted of royal duties such as visiting hospitals, introducing the knights' training, and giving guides of nearby tourist locations. Her visits to hospitals and orphanages were especially frequent, which was how she became so popular among the common people.

"The Surprisingly Approachable Princess"—that nickname was not just for show. She really was quite the popular princess in the capital. That was why watching Hildetaura do farmwork was quite the refreshing sight. She had said once before that no matter how much she wanted to get her hands dirty with this kind of work, being royalty meant that dignity and grace were always expected of her.

Incidentally, I had done physical labor several times on *Occupation Observation*, and recently I'd been visiting farms a lot because of all the dog episodes they were wanting to record.

"It is, yes. I wanted to broaden my scope of work a little this summer."

Well, that was interesting.

“The daughters of the Liston and Silver families are working very hard, after all. It would not be good for me to slack off.”

It was out of a sense of competition, then. It wasn't all that surprising—Hildetaura was the one out of our little trio that wanted to promote magivision most. It didn't seem like work that the princess should be doing, but on the other hand, it was precisely *because* she was the princess that she was being proactive and putting her all into it.

For all intents and purposes, magivision was a state-owned initiative. It was only functioning because of the massive investments that had been put into it. Honestly speaking, the current profits were far from sufficient. If magivision didn't start showing satisfactory results, the one who would be held responsible was the one in charge of deciding national policies in the first place—in other words, the ruler of the country: Hildetaura's father. For Hildetaura, this really was a personal matter.

“Besides, this work is not as different as you would think,” she said.

“Really?” For me, this was like an episode of *Occupation Observation*, but that didn't apply to her.

After we finished the recording of the physical work, a table filled with food made from local produce was set up underneath the blue sky. It looked delicious.

“We're currently looking for some young farmhands to work here.”

“We're getting on in years now, and physical labor is taking its toll. But we're so short-handed that there's no way we can stop what we're doing...” The final scene involved Hildetaura interviewing the old couple who owned the farm, who took that opportunity to appeal to the viewers about their current predicament.

I see now. This doubles up as a help wanted ad. For the Surprisingly Approachable Princess, who was kind to her citizens, this was a way to collaborate with them.

After the interview had concluded, the popular princess closed out with her

own comments: “The work I did today was tough. You have to wake up early in the morning, it is tiring work, and since you are dealing with living animals, you cannot let your guard down. However, it is thanks to these people who work tirelessly in the fields that food is produced and we can live without starving. Farmwork is difficult. The pay may feel low compared to the effort put in. But I believe it is a job that people should be proud of. There is nothing to be ashamed of. If you are interested in taking up the farm life, please consider finding a job here.”

Everything was slotting into place. Hildetaura might have been a bit of an oddball, but her sincere words and earnest expression worked well together. Her persuasiveness at moments like this always felt befitting of royalty.

Things did not end there, however.

“Now, Nia! It is time for our match!”

The recording of the farmwork had finished, and we’d chosen to have an early lunch with the food that the workers had so kindly prepared for us. After that, we’d moved on to the next stage of my work.

Yes. The dog.

This was a farm with livestock—and therefore, they had a sheepdog. It was often energetically running around the fields, so it seemed fast...for a dog, anyway. And then, just as I had been thinking to myself that it seemed as if I would win easily again today, Hildetaura, for some reason, chose to jump in as well.

“Despite how I look, I have been learning the royal court’s secret traditional form of martial arts for self-defense since I was young. I am quite confident in my athletic ability.”

A traditional form of martial arts? Well, I already knew that she had been training her body, at least.

“Do not think you are the only one who can win a race against a dog!”

Sure thing, Princess.

“In that case, are you prepared to be hated by the dog?” I asked. The

medium-sized dog with its black-and-white coat was currently excitedly licking Hildetaura's hand, getting saliva all over her. It was a very cute dog, fluffy and friendly to all.

But these matches always ended with the dog hating me. It'd bark and howl very aggressively at me, as if saying, "You, hurry up and go home already!" It was as if that friendliness it'd presented beforehand had never existed. Could she handle it? Suddenly being hated by a dog that had warmed up to you only a few minutes before could be a shock.



“Heh... It is lonely up at the top.” Hildetaura smirked, and I could agree with that. “Allow me to be the one to smear mud over your undefeated record!”

As a result, I ended up being hated by not just the dog but Hildetaura as well.

My recordings in the capital continued. Today was a recording with a few familiar faces.

“It’s nice to see you again, Nia.”

“We’re excited to work with you.”

“You should come and see more of our plays!”

It was a reunion with the actors of the Ice Rose Theater Company, as had been discussed back home. I would take a tour of the royal capital with the Twin Ice Princes, Julian and Lucida, and Sharro White, their up-and-coming lead actress. I had wondered why they’d chosen sightseeing as the topic, but it wasn’t as if all our viewers lived in the capital, and foreign tourists would have the opportunity to view magivision on their visits as well. Furthermore, there were apparently many native residents who had not actually gone to see the sights of the capital *because* they weren’t tourists.

Basically, there was some level of demand for this kind of show, so if they wanted me to do it, I would. But just making it an episode of us going on a regular tour was boring, so more was added to the concept: since everyone except me was a real actor, we would let their personal character shine and change their outfits and makeup every scene—we had them bring their costumes from some of their productions to help with that.

Thanks to the gaudy appearance of the actors along with my presence, people couldn’t take their eyes off of us as we walked down the streets of the capital. I was excited to see what effect this would have on the ratings.

“What do you think, Nia? I totally pull off a male role, right?” Sharro twirled around, showing off her outfit from when she had played the role of the male heir of a poor noble.

“Yes, well...”

I don't think it's bad. Yeah. I think it's good... Yeah. It's fine, I guess.

“Hey, you were comparing me to Lucida just now, weren't you?” As I'd nodded vaguely to myself, Sharro's eyebrows pinched together. I understood why she was mad, but I couldn't help it.

“I'm sorry. She's right beside you, so...”

Next to the poor noble son was a dazzling prince. It was hard not to see how much more naturally Lucida pulled it off than Sharro when they were side by side like this.

“Well, this *is* my specialty,” Lucida chuckled. As expected of one half of the Twin Princes, her radiance was something else.

“Though you wouldn't struggle with female roles either, you know,” Julian said, joining us a little late in a magnificent dress. Given they were twins, it meant they were identical, and it meant both could fulfill roles of the opposite gender.

Apparently, the dress Julian wore was from a play called *One Day*. The main character was a princess who fell in love with a poor baron's heir. I had no doubt it was a boring story that went around in circles before reaching its conclusion. You know, the kind of conflicts that could be resolved by them just saying they liked each other, and yet they didn't. It seemed the twins had decided to have a little fun and swap roles—usually, Julian took the prince's role.

“Oh. My. Goodness! The Twin Princes in the flesh... They're so stunning...” As a magivision fanatic who had seen plenty of their plays, Lynokis spent the whole recording from start to finish letting out enraptured sighs. Her face was melting in adoration the entire time.

I really hadn't had the chance to train with her properly in recent weeks. *I'll train you for real once we're finally on our real vacation. I'll even put you through those ascetic practices that you love. Just wait a little longer.*

After that recording, the morning schedule was complete, and I boarded Hildetaura's airship that was decorated with the crest of the Kingdom of Altoire.

We'd both be in the same location for the afternoon recording. We decided to have lunch on the journey there.

"At this rate, we should be able to get our days off as planned, Nia," Hildetaura said.

Hildetaura, Mirko, and I all sat down together at the table. It seemed Mirko was permanently by Hildetaura's side during this summer's recordings. It made sense—there was no way you could leave royalty unattended as their supervisor.

When we sat ourselves down, we had an aperitif... No, we had only water poured into our glasses and then food served. Even if Hildetaura was royalty, she was still too young to be having alcohol. The only exception that should be allowed was myself, as someone who was internally much older than their body. Though...as long as Lynokis was present, that would never happen. She was right behind me at the moment too. She was *always* with me.

Mirko took water as well. Naturally, she wouldn't drink during work.

There were two more days on our work schedule before the summer work was over, and if Hildetaura was to be believed, we would be able to go on our vacation as planned.

"Yes. There have been some slight deviations, but otherwise, things are very much going according to schedule. It was a five-day holiday, right? You should be fine." Mirko was the one in charge of organizing the schedule, so if she said we'd manage, then there was no way we wouldn't.

"I'm glad. This is all I've been looking forward to this summer." This really had been the summer from hell. Well, I supposed it had really only been hell while I was in my home territory. The other territories were actually somewhat considerate! I didn't care that they were my friends and relatives—the staff in the Liston territories showed far too little restraint with me!

Eighty percent of my time in the capital involved me doing work with Hildetaura. Unsurprisingly, they didn't make a schedule intended to murder me like that blasted Bendelio had. I still managed a good amount of work while here, though. Hildetaura's recordings usually consisted of her royal duties, but since she was collaborating with me, she decided she might as well do activities

that were more my style as well.

Hildetaura's royal status no doubt limited what she was allowed to do. As much as the class system was losing its meaning, there was a big difference in how the public viewed a simple aristocratic child, compared to a member of royalty. There was the possibility that she would be criticized for not acting like royalty, or she might even be having pressure put on her to act appropriately for her station. That was an issue related to her goal—the revival of the authority of the ruling class. It might be that she felt that she couldn't participate in anything that would undermine said authority.

Being royalty seemed like such a difficult task.

"I must say, though, you're a very calm girl, Nia," Mirko suddenly said as I was picking away at the appetizers. "Hilde is already far more composed than a child should be, but you're even more collected than her."

Naturally. I wasn't even really a child, after all.

"You're so brave," she continued. "No matter what location we go to or what kind of people we're working with, you're never afraid or nervous around them. I almost forget that you're still a child sometimes."

Naturally. If worse came to worst, I could just beat them up. Why should I be afraid of them?

"As you can see from my hair, I have already faced death once. Because of that experience, nothing fazes me anymore." My hair color still hadn't returned to normal. During the mana evaluation before the school semester started, I'd learned that my mana receptors had been destroyed. "I'm lucky enough just to be alive."

Honestly, I wished that the real Nia Liston had gotten to survive rather than an old foggy like me.

No... I shouldn't think that way. I could be as angry as I wanted about someone's death, but it wouldn't bring them back. Whatever twist of fate had led to this situation, living a full life in this body would be the best offering I could give to Nia. My goal right now was to rebuild the Liston family.

"Are there any new proposals?"

“Looking at the sales statistics, most buyers of MagiPads are still on the wealthy side...”

“Preferably something we could make long-term...”

Even today’s lunch naturally drifted to us discussing work, drifting from topic to topic.

“Our dog at the castle is really quite fast,” Hildetaura boasted.

Mirko shook her head. “But it’s a big dog... Nia’s so small, the contrast would be quite mean.”

“I don’t mind the size of the dog. I was never all that obsessed with winning in the first place. In fact, I think there are times where losing might make it more exciting...”

“Wait! Then why did you not lose in the race against me?”

“You were even slower than the dog. If I’d lost against you, it would’ve been blatantly obvious that I’d deliberately held back.”

“Blatantly obvious?! I-I feel so ashamed...”

We came up with various ideas for new projects but nothing that particularly struck as a winner.

Two days after we spoke about the particulars of our vacation, we finally reached the end of our work schedule.

“Sorry, Nia. Circumstances have changed a little.”

When we met up at the port, Hildetaura uttered the most ominous words she ever could have, and with a troubled face to boot.

“Wait, Hilde. I don’t want to hear any more.”

Is it impossible for us to go on holiday, after all? Has it been canceled? Please don’t say it.

How hard had I worked specifically so I could greet these last five days without worry? I’d finished an impossible recording schedule, settled for unsatisfactory training, and steadily worked on my summer homework every

day.

All of that!

All of that had been for the sake of my last five days of vacation!

And yet!

And yet!

Let me aim this anger right at Bendelio!

“No, Nia, it’s not canceled.” The princess herself held out a hand to tell her bodyguards to stop when they suddenly stepped forward. I don’t know if they’d seen my change in expression, sensed my change in emotions, or perhaps felt my overflowing anger and bloodlust, but they seemed to have reacted instinctively. “We will have our holiday period as planned. We will leave tonight and have a full five days starting tomorrow. We will be able to rest and relax to our hearts’ content.”

Hearing that alone was already enough to calm me down. I had no complaints if that were the case. Naturally, however, there was a “but” attached to this.

“Um... Actually, I have been informed that my father went to the island this morning.”

What...?

“Are you asking if it’s okay that your father is there?”

“Well, to put it simply, it appears my father is also there...on vacation.”

Now that I thought about it, she *had* said that our destination was a private island owned by the royal family. In which case, it would make sense that royalty other than Hildetaura would make use of it as well.

Hmm, so the king will be there, will he?

“Is your father the kind to dote on children?”

“No, not at all. In fact, I would say he does not quite understand a child’s heart. He is immature enough to completely ignore them.”

“Then everything’s fine.”

“What? Really?”

But of course. If he were the type to get *too* involved, I’d be a bit bothered. But if he was the opposite, that was fine. Besides, there would definitely be servants there for the royal family, so it was never going to be just a gathering of children in the first place. In that case, her father being there was as simple as one more adult added to the group.

“Is it really all right? There might be a king wandering around the area, or reading a book in a hammock underneath the shade of the trees, or having fun at a barbecue. Is it *really* okay? Would that not make you uncomfortable? You won’t feel disturbed by his presence?”

Well, I might feel a bit of the latter, but beyond that, no.

“You said he’s also there on vacation, right? He’s put in a lot of hard work and finally reached his holiday period. I understand exactly how that feels and that’s why I can’t really be too upset.” Besides, even though he was the king, I could deal with him the way I was prepared to deal with everyone else: if worse came to worst, things would work out. I would give him a good beating, and if he was in the way of something, I would simply knock him out. If he was there to rest, then I would let him rest as much as he liked. I would gladly lend him a hand.

“I’m okay with it. I am a little worried about Relia, though.”

“That was exactly what I was thinking,” Hildetaura replied with a sigh.

Could Relia remain calm? If there was a king wandering around the area, or reading a book in a hammock underneath the shade of the trees, or having fun at a barbecue, could she really ignore him? She was still slightly nervous even around Hildetaura—and yet we were expecting her to be calm around the *king*?

There was no way.

“Nope, nope, nope, no way, absolutely not! Meeting His Majesty is out of the question! *Absolutely* out of the question!”

We hadn’t been sure if Relia would make the island trip due to the sudden influx of work from the Silver Broadcasting Station’s new paper play project, but for better or for worse, she’d made it. Perhaps I should say, *unfortunately*, she’d

made it to our five-day trip to the royal family's floating island where the king of Altoire was already vacationing.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?! Why would you tell me that *after* we land?!"

We had met up with Reliared in the capital the previous evening, and we had all boarded the airship for a pleasant night flight through the skies—and she had remained blissfully unaware of the truth the whole time. The next morning, all of us happy and with cheerful, bright smiles on our faces, we had disembarked from the airship while excitedly discussing the fun days that awaited us. And then, as the ramp to the airship was raised, I had dropped the bombshell. "Oh, I just remembered, Hilde's father will be here too. What a coincidence."

The sudden grim and downcast expression that overtook Relia's radiant and energetic smile was enough to make me question my own conscience. Her face was like a sky abruptly overrun with thunderclouds.

"What do you mean 'I just remembered'?! You absolutely planned to tell me here, didn't you?!"

Of course her reaction hurt my heart. It caused me great pain. I felt so incredibly sorry for her. Why would I be happy to steal a child's joy? *But forgive me, Relia. I had no other choice. Your family stole my paper play idea, after all. Allow me this little bit of revenge.* I didn't care much about losing the battles I was guaranteed to win, but I obsessed far more over the results of battles where the outcome was uncertain. Magivision was one of these battles for me. I would not let this end with such a one-sided loss.

"It'll be all right," I said. "The king is human too. There's no need to be that nervous. He isn't here as ruler of the kingdom if he's on vacation—he's just some old man."

"How?! How can you say that?! Why are you this calm?! This is the *king*! Now that I think about it, weren't you calm when we met Miss Hilde too?! Who do you think the royal family are?!"

You would think she would know my answer by now.

“Royalty are simply people who were born into a royal house. There is nothing superior about them. The king is nothing more than a silly old man of a family that likes to act like they’re special. Right, Hilde?”

“I apologize, but from my position, I must disagree.”

Oh, of course. She was royalty too, after all. Hildetaura’s smile was...a little scary, so I decided to stop with the scathing remarks about the royal family for now.

“From what Hilde has told me, the king is not someone who is overly concerned with children, so I don’t think you need to worry too much. Let’s go.”

“Noooo! I don’t wannaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

I took the protesting Reliared’s hand and dragged her kicking and screaming out of the small port towards the house looming in front of us.

The island wasn’t all that big, but it was equipped with all the necessary facilities. Just as farming or agricultural islands had rich soil and good quality grass, this island had an excellent climate. The temperature changes from one season to the next were mild, which made it a great place to relax all year long. What was more, there was an abundance of water and greenery, which meant there was plenty of good food to eat.

Since the royal family owned the land, the place was well maintained and renovated to make it an even more welcoming place to stay. It was also used as a place of recuperation too, apparently. In other words, it was the perfect vacation spot if you wanted to relax.

In hindsight, the king’s presence actually turned out to be quite fortuitous.

A deck chair and a table were set up underneath a tree near the villa. There, a pompous-looking man in a bathrobe was lying reading a book—I could see him even from a distance.

“That is my father,” Hildetaura said, confirming my assumption.

I hadn’t thought we’d end up bumping into the king right off the bat, though. And...why was he wearing a *bathrobe*? Did he go for a bath and decide to stay

dressed like that? Whatever the case, at least it looked like he was enjoying his vacation.

“Father,” Hildetaura called as we approached.

“Imagine I’m not here. The last thing I want is to have to act like a king even on my days off,” he coldly responded, not looking up from his book.

“As if you ever acted like a king in the first place. Could you at least deem it worth your time to say hello to your daughter’s friends?” Hildetaura was usually so kind and cheerful to everyone she met, but her words now were laced with such venom. She really was different when interacting with her family.

“Like I care. Don’t bother me.”

Oh, so this was the kind of man the king was. But as bad as his attitude was, it was great for us. We would be allowed to enjoy our time here however we wished, and he could do as he wished. This was a much better scenario than if he’d been an overbearing father.

“As the man himself has clearly stated, you are permitted to treat him as if he does not exist. Pay him absolutely no mind. Let us be off.”

Good, let’s go. Reliared was already panicking at the sudden run-in with the king, so I wanted to hurry up and get to our rooms so she could calm down. We handed our luggage off to the servants who had come to greet us, and turned towards the large mansion.

“Nia Liston.”

What was this now? I turned around at the sound of my name to see the king still lying as he was. *You know me?*

His eyes did not leave his book as he continued, “When will you finally spread magivision far and wide?”

“Um... Excuse me?”

What was he saying?

“I feel a resolve from you—a resolve as if you’ve decided to live for magivision. So? When will you leave your mark?”

I had no memory of ever making a decision like that, but it was true I had decided I would put my life on the line for it—for the sake of the real Nia, and for the Liston family.

“Are you not being too passive? Too naive? If you’re truly serious, if you have resolved to live for magivision, then you need to see that through. Use whatever you have at your disposal. The end arrives without warning. Don’t think chances will always be available in such a money-grubbing world.”

Now this is interesting indeed...

“Father!”

“I’ve said my piece. Now leave.”

Even at Hildetaura’s admonishment, he clearly had no desire to say much more.

That was my first meeting with Hyurence Altoire, fourteenth king of Altoire.

Chapter 4: Valiant Spirits

“Whew...” I felt myself finally able to relax after Lynokis and I were shown to our room. As expected of a property belonging to royalty, the rooms were spacious and luxurious, ready to accommodate any guest.

“That was the first time I’d ever seen His Majesty,” Lynokis admitted as she prepared tea for me while I took a seat at the small table—the room had come with a tea set ready and waiting.

“And I.”

A part of me assumed my parents had probably met him before. The previous Nia Liston definitely had not. Neal... Surprisingly, I could imagine they’d met.

“Do you know what kind of man he is? Has Her Highness told you anything?”

“Nope, nothing.” I hadn’t even stopped to think of the kind of man he could be until now. I had no interest in him, and I hadn’t expected him to actually interact with me directly. “Whenever he came up in conversation, Hildetaura would always look unhappy, so I generally avoided the topic of her family. Do *you* know what kind of man he is?”

“I’ve only heard rumors, but apparently he is quite sharp, a coolheaded realist, and also a womanizer. That’s all.”

So even rumors formed that kind of image of him.

“For now, I can’t say the rumors sound wrong,” I concluded. From the few words I’d exchanged with him, he seemed to have good political sense, and that small interaction was enough to see how levelheaded of a person he was. I couldn’t vouch for his love of women, but heroes did love a bit of spice in their life, so I didn’t think it was necessarily surprising... Well, maybe it was a bit.

Honestly, I got the sense that he cared little about anything other than his royal duties. Never mind women, I didn’t think even his own family or blood relatives had any place in his heart. In fact, I’d go as far as to say he had no interest in people at all.

“What are your plans for today, Young Mistress?”

I’d discussed possible plans with Hildetaura and Reliared on the way here, but we’d never actually come to a conclusion. We’d eventually decided we would arrive at the villa first and then go on a little walk to get the lay of the land, but...

“Given Relia’s state right now, I’m not entirely sure what the plan is anymore.”

Reliared had been in a terrible mood after our meeting with the king. We’d managed to drag her to her room, but she’d holed herself up with her personal attendant immediately after and yelled, “I refuse to go outside today!” from the other side of the door. It appeared that suddenly being confronted with the king had made Reliared’s anxiety soar. It might be impossible to expect to go anywhere with her for the rest of the day.

Even if that were the case, I had been left with things I needed to consider now anyway.

“I’m being too passive... Too naive...”

I couldn’t get the king’s words out of my head. *You’ve got some guts, you middle-aged whippersnapper.* I was trying my best to hold back and restrain myself, acting as much like a child as I could, and yet he dared call me too passive? Too naive? If I could use all the power I wished, then I wouldn’t be struggling in the first place.

Well...it was frustrating, but I could agree with much of his assessment. He was right in that I didn’t have unlimited opportunities. To begin with, even before the issue of promoting magivision, I had the ticking clock of the Liston family finances to think about. I didn’t know when or how I would be informed of our end. Currently, I was doing my best to promote magivision as fast as I could, without overextending myself.

But even that had been deemed too slow.

It might be too early to bring this up, but I may have no other choice. I had to make my move while I still had time. If I didn’t seriously start pushing this work, I could end up regretting it.

“Here you are.”

I looked up at Lynokis as she served my tea. *You’re being premature, I thought. It’s too early. No matter how you look at it, she’s still too inexperienced.*

Lynokis was...still too weak. But when I stopped to think of the time I had left, what other option did I have? Honestly, I might be too late even if I started now.

“Hey, Lynokis.” As her master, I would absolutely never permit this, but as Nia Liston—the girl who had resolved to protect her family—I had to raise the proposal. “Have you ever considered becoming this country’s strongest woman?”

“E-Excuse me?”

I had Lynokis sit opposite me so I could explain what I had been planning for the future.

“Um... So to summarize, you’d like to make a killing with the prize money from a martial arts tournament?”

“Close enough.”

We’d be doing what they did in back alleys and at the Umbral Arena, so her understanding wasn’t entirely wrong. Ostensibly, it would simply be a tournament of an extremely large scale. It would likely attract many different people with many different goals.

“I’ve always wanted to organize a state-sponsored tournament. Gather the world’s strongest fighters in one place, and have them fight to determine who’s at the top. I think it would do great on magivision. It’s something I planned to work towards once the industry was bigger and had spread to other countries.”

But to do that, we needed to lay the groundwork. This wasn’t a project that would come together with strength, riches, or authority alone. It was something we had to build up together, cooperating with people from all over.

In this life, there was one thing that I had been made painfully aware of

thanks to my involvement in the magivision industry: there were many things that wouldn't go as planned simply by having power, simply by being strong. The world was not so simple that all its problems could be cleaned up with violence.

The more magivision spread and became known by the world, the more strength each broadcasting station acquired. Through the process, our knowledge on the field would grow, our connections to various fields would be formed, and of course, those willing to support us would be found. Vikson Silver was a prime example of the latter, having entered the industry as an aristocrat, and I had made a strong ally in Hildetaura, who was of royalty. I didn't think this was the *perfect* time to start setting this up per se, but I was sure we could create a big enough buzz even with our current, limited progress.

The whole world might be a far-off dream, but deciding who the strongest in Altoire was seemed far from impossible.

The biggest problem that faced me was that I was still too young—I wasn't even a teenager yet. There was no way I could participate as a fighter. Don't get me wrong, I could absolutely mow down the competition, but there would definitely be kids who would try to emulate me. That was why I wanted to avoid going to such lengths in public as much as possible.

Who would even listen to such a proposal from me? There were very few adults in the world who would seriously consider a child's fantasies. I had originally been planning to very carefully take the time to build up the foundations to make a large-scale tournament feasible while also continuing to promote magivision, and then I would enter said tournament. It was a project I had intended to work on over years.

But that might be too slow.

No matter how hard I pushed, no matter how much I tried to deceive people of my age, it would take at least five years. I could conceal my age and status, but I couldn't hide my appearance. And that was where Lynokis came in.

"One year." I held my index finger straight up. "I will turn you into the country's strongest martial artist in one year."

"Wh-What? Me, the strongest...?" Unsurprisingly, Lynokis was befuddled. Of

course she would be—from where she stood, that surely seemed like a distant goal.

“If you are my student, I expect you to manage that much eventually anyway.” This was absolutely too early for her, but she had the potential. Even in recent training, her control of chi had been stabilizing. Give it a year, and I could at least get her as strong as the ants crawling at my feet. If she made it that far, I was sure she could become the nation’s strongest. If Hildetaura’s bodyguards were strong enough to be considered prestigious knights by the public, then one year of training would be more than enough.

“Um, I won’t deny that I want to get stronger, but that is purely so I can be a suitable bodyguard for you. I have no interest in becoming some spectacle entering tournaments or being the strongest...”

I see...

“Well, never mind, then.” This wasn’t something I could force upon her, even as her master. There wasn’t the time to train someone who had no motivation to achieve that goal.

“I do apologize, Young Mistress. I just think this is well beyond my position...”

“No, I understand. Even I realize that something like this is well beyond what should be asked of a personal attendant.” This outcome was entirely within expectations. Observing Lynokis’s attitude and enthusiasm towards martial arts over the last few years, I had thought she might give that answer. She didn’t have much of a thirst for strength. “I’ll train Gandolph or something instead. I’m sure someone like Anzel has plenty of room for growth as well.”

Gandolph, an instructor of the Heavenstriker school, adored me, always wanting to call me his master. If I asked him to do this, he would no doubt be crying in joy as he accepted. He was also my second student. And then there was Anzel of the Shifty Shadow Rat. He had the potential as well, so he’d certainly be a good candidate. That would entirely depend on his motivation for it, though.

“Wait, Young Mistress,” Lynokis suddenly spoke up. “Should you not treasure me more than Gandolph or Anzel? I am your official student, aren’t I? Gandolph is a practitioner of a completely different style, and Anzel is the master of a bar

who has his roots in the underworld.”

“But you don’t want to do this, do you?”

“Perhaps not, but I hate the thought of you pushing me aside to train someone else more!”

Is that what this is all about?

“I can’t just lie down and accept that! I have dedicated body and soul to you! Don’t look at them, look at me! You just need to train me!”

I was stunned into silence for a moment.

“I can’t comment on your soul, but you most certainly haven’t dedicated your body to me.”

“I’ve already made arrangements. You will receive my body when the time comes!”

Really now? Well, I didn’t particularly need it. I’d cancel the reservation when the time came.

For some reason, Lynokis had suddenly mustered up the courage to agree to my plan to make her the country’s strongest. With that decided, my own Project Magivision strategy had been put into motion.

“Starting today, I’m going to begin teaching you how to perform Techniques.”

After I persuaded Lynokis to assist me with my goal, we had both changed into our training outfits and made our way to an isolated area. When we asked the servants of the villa for a quiet location, this was where they’d directed us: the middle of a small forest that had been untouched by human hands. It was near a small lake where a spring had formed. The dappled sunlight filtering through the trees was beautiful. The lake water looked so clean that I was sure we could drink it.

It was a great location. The smell of the thick foliage was somewhat nostalgic. *Maybe I’ll use this area when I train too.* It was far enough away from the villa that I could be a little noisy and not disturb anyone.

“Techniques? Like...forms?”

“No, forms are forms—a way to refer to punches and kicks done in a methodical way; they’re different from Techniques.” I honestly still thought it was too early for Lynokis to learn a Technique—but I threw aside that worry and continued. “I need to preface with this: my Techniques are pretty much all Ultimates. If you use them on those with no foundation in chi manipulation, or who haven’t trained their body well, they will one-hundred-percent die. You must not use them carelessly—only when you absolutely must. There always comes a time when one martial artist must eliminate another, but you must avoid being in a situation where you accidentally kill your opponent despite your intentions. I despise an irresponsible fist. The responsibility for your mistakes also then falls on me for passing on my Techniques to an inexperienced student.”

As someone who’d only become my apprentice because she wanted to become strong enough to protect me, I liked to believe that she wouldn’t abuse such skills. No, I *did* believe she wouldn’t.

“I will only teach you one for now. In the tournament I have in mind, I think you should be able to win with just this. So we’ll spend this next year training you in the Technique until we’re at a point I deem satisfactory.”

“Could I...ask a question first?”

“Hm? Do you have complaints? Are you unhappy in some way? You’re not about to ask me to teach you more than one Technique, are you? Do you really think you can handle that?”

“No, that’s not it. I have no complaints about the Technique. It’s just...um... I was thinking that... Do you not think it’s about time to come clean?”

What was she talking about?

“Come clean about what? Trying to teach you Techniques? If I’m honest, I agree that it’s still too early for you, but—”

“No, not the Techniques. I mean, um... How do I put this...?” Lynokis seemed to be spending a lot of time choosing her words. Her face was graver than I’d ever seen, and from the way she kept opening her mouth, then closing it again and shaking her head, it was obvious she was debating whether or not to continue.

“Hurry up and tell me. Time is of the essence.”

Project Magivision would enter its next phase today, right now. Henceforth, my magivision activities would take on a different turn. I would be even more pressured for time than ever before, and that meant I had to spend my precious time wisely. Especially now, when the king was present and accessible. I needed to find the time to start up a conversation and form a connection with him. He would absolutely be a valuable asset.

Most importantly, I hadn't given up on my five days of vacation. It was a deserved break free from work. Just as the body needed time to rest after training, my mind and spirit absolutely needed rest from work. I would make sure I played about to my heart's content—to the extreme.

With the right instructions, Lynokis could train just fine on her own. In fact, both general training and actual practice of Techniques were tasks that were easier to focus on without others around. Lynokis would carry out her training, and I would enjoy my vacation to the fullest. I needed to establish things quickly so I could do that.

“Okay. Then I'll say it straight.” Having dispelled her doubts, Lynokis looked directly at me. “Um... Young Mistress, do you still intend to hide that you are a Valiant Spirit?” The implication in the words that Lynokis had so carefully chosen were befitting of the time she'd taken.

“Hm? What is a Valiant Spirit?” Since it was the first time I'd heard such a term, the meaning didn't sink in immediately. But once Lynokis explained, I realized that my initial interpretation was correct.

That's it. I'm pretty much possessing this body as a Valiant Spirit.

I had simply accepted that I was now residing in Nia Liston's body—it was all I *could* do. I was more than aware that I had been put in an inexplicable position, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. It wasn't as if I could consult with anyone, and I had no idea where to start looking into it.

A mysterious man had forcefully shoved me into a dead child's body. That was the start of it all. A transfer of souls—a phenomenon that had led to me suddenly becoming a completely different person—would, in the modern age, be referred to as a Valiant Spirit Possession.

“Although they have not disclosed the details, the Church of the Saints has stated that ‘souls of powerful heroes dwell within the dead and live a second life,’ so it is a well-known phenomenon. This type of possession is rare, but it isn’t impossible.”

In other words, there were other actual examples of this.

“Valiant Spirits will take residence in a body immediately after its death. Like a miracle, the person’s body will return to life in that short moment where they are suspended in the gap between life and death...and they will be a completely different person when they reawaken. At the moment of death, the original soul of the body leaves, and in that short window of time, the spirit enters and gains possession of the body. This is what we call Valiant Spirit Possession.”

At the moment of death, the original soul of the body leaves...

“It all happened on that night you were still four years old, right? After that night, your symptoms alleviated, and you headed towards recovery. Knowing what I know now, I understand what happened: you healed her body with chi, didn’t you?”

Hm... If Lynokis’s words were correct, then that would mean the original Nia Liston was well and truly dead after all. I won’t pretend I’d had any hope in the first place, but...a child’s death was simply too tragic. I had hoped I was wrong.

“Valiant Spirits are often great heroes of history whose names were known far and wide, but many lose their memories when they return. What they can remember tends to be limited to things like their moral code or the sorts of things they did in order to stay alive. I hear there are those who managed to retain their memories, but they seem to be exceptions to the norm...”

So even the memory loss was normal. In other words, anything that I had saved in my mind in my past life would be impossible to retrieve, but anything engraved on my soul I could reference...something like that, at least.

Yup. The more I listen to this, the more it applies to me.

“That fits your situation, doesn’t it, Young Mistress? You are some famous martial artist from the past, aren’t you?”

Yes, that was absolutely it. Nothing even hinted to the contrary.

“I’m surprised you stayed quiet this long. You must have been desperate to ask, right?” Had I been in Lynokis’s shoes, I would probably have asked right away; I would have been far too curious.

But... I see. I had been caught, had I? I wasn’t the smartest cookie around, so I hadn’t been trying all that hard to be careful. I knew that I would be digging my own grave if I tried too hard to hide it. I wondered when I had been caught. From how Lynokis was acting, it had to have been fairly early on. Even I thought I had been doing one too many unnatural things in this body.

Lynokis flashed me a troubled smile. “Sometimes there are things that you want to confirm but can’t bring yourself to. For the master and mistress, their daughter is...” she trailed off. “And the one I had begun to care for was the real young mistress, so I didn’t want to have to accept it was true...”

Right. Of course. There were lots of things out there that you would love to confirm, but the thought of doing so was too frightening.

“Have my parents realized?”

“I’m not sure. I was at your side through much of your illness, so of course I would notice, however much I wished to deny it, but... No, the two of them are not stupid. I’m sure they’ve realized. They just have no desire to confirm anymore. If they do, they’ll have to accept that their daughter really did die that night...”

This...wasn’t something I could fully process in that moment, so it would be best to move on from the topic. We could also put aside the fact that I was a Valiant Spirit. There was nothing we could do about death, no matter how much you cursed it, or how much you didn’t want to admit it was real. If the real Nia’s soul would return to her body upon my death, things would be different. But that wasn’t the reality of the situation.

“Should I hide that I’m a Valiant Spirit? Or is it okay for people to know?”

“I believe it would be for the best that you hide it. Valiant Spirits are often past greats, so the moment the Church knows of your existence, they’ll come to try and take you away. There’s a high possibility you used to be a Saint in the past, after all.”

I had the sense that there'd been a prominent theocracy with a similar name as the Church of the Saints during my previous life, as well.

"They used to be quite forceful in the past, wielding their power and authority with the Saintess at the helm," Lynokis explained. "They would kidnap and get involved in human trafficking just to collect those possessed by spirits. The one possessed could even be royalty, and they would still find some way to obtain them... Nowadays, though, even the Church is losing their power and authority. Even if they talk to you, I don't think they'll force you to go along with them."

I hadn't been especially worried about that.

"If that happens, I'll figure things out. It'll be fine."

"You're a little too strong, after all."

We both laughed, but our voices were hollow.

I'm not a little too strong; I'm way too strong. Is Lynokis still unaware of how strong I am? It was a bit of a shock to hear as her master. A master naturally wants their students to always view them as someone amazing.

"That being said, there's no way to guarantee the Church *won't* try and force you to go with them, and other troublesome situations may follow. It would be best if you continued acting as Young Mistress Nia, just as you have been."

Understood. I would continue to hide my identity then.

"Now then, shall we begin our training?"

We'd gotten a little distracted, but it was about time we went back to the reason we were here to begin with—for the sake of my vacation.

Our conversation went a little longer than intended, but we were still able to start training on schedule. It wasn't as if our conversation had been pointless either. Lynokis being aware of my circumstances made it much easier to interact with her—I no longer had to hold back.

It was truly good timing that we managed to talk about me being a Valiant Spirit right before we moved into the Techniques.

Who am I? That one fundamental question had remained unanswered for the

past two years. It had never posed any problems, so I decided it wasn't worth panicking about. I even began to make peace with never knowing the truth. If I ended up feeling curious about it during a time I was free, I could look into it then.

Upon learning that Valiant Spirit Possession was a known phenomenon, and that it likely applied to my situation, more than half of my questions had been cleared up. It wasn't important for me to learn my exact identity at this point. The present was much more important than a time that had already passed. My priority now was to do as Nia Liston should.

"It would be great if I could show this move to you as often as you needed, but this body still can't fire off consecutive shots. So make sure not to miss it."

Almost all Techniques that utilized chi held immense power, and that meant the recoil was just as extreme. There were only a handful of Techniques that this small, untrained body could wield. Even intermediate Techniques that could blast a behemoth to smithereens would be impossible.

The Technique I was teaching Lynokis now was one of the most basic. Personally, it was a very lacking skill, but Lynokis remained inexperienced at handling chi, so it would be perfect for her. I was sure the skill would be compatible with her as well, so personally, it was a good choice.

"You should already know how to use the basic form." She had already used it against Gandolph during the club fair before school started, and against the Sword Demon down in the Umbral Arena—it was that one swift strike she would always fire off. It was a preemptive strike, fast enough to move well before the opponent could. "Chi Fist: Rumbling Thunder. The Heavenstriker seems to view it as some hidden art, but in reality, it is a simple beginner's Technique."

I curled my right fingers into a fist and demonstrated the basic form.

"Don't give in to the desire to blink. This will be over in a moment."

A very quick moment. Take all the chi within your body, take a large step forward, and fire that chi out through your fist.

A sound like a thunderbolt shooting down from the heavens rang out. The

advancing shock wave I called forth powered through the lake, splitting it into two.

Hm...

“Underwhelming.” I nodded at the result I had expected. Underneath the frantic birds that had been startled by the sound, the parted waters returned to normal.

The sound itself had plenty of impact, and yet the power of it was so pitiful... This would defeat a B-tier monster at best. I would give it a passing grade at the very least; it was the first Technique I had used since starting this life, after all.

For a basic Technique, it had put less strain on my body than expected. If this was all it took, it might be possible for me to do Techniques one or two steps higher—any higher would probably be dangerous, though. The moment I used one above my capacity, my bones would likely be shattered, and my muscles and tendons ruptured.

“Did you see it?”

“Y-Yes... That was incredible, Young Mistress.”

Except it hadn’t been really. It’d at least *looked* flashy, though, so I could understand her surprise.

“The logic behind it is the same as your preemptive attack. The main difference is how you distribute your internal chi.”

“Um... Would the Technique itself be an example of external chi, then?”

“No, this uses your internal chi only. Besides, I still haven’t taught you how to use external chi—I don’t think you could even learn it right now.”

Chi was made up of eight elements, but you could broadly split it into two: the internal chi within your body and the external chi that you shot out of it. Inner chi was the foundation and essence of one’s chi. Outer chi was the application of one’s chi.

Without training to control your inner chi, it was practically impossible to control outer chi. But I had taught Lynokis all this when she first started training under me, so I didn’t need to reiterate all of that now.

“But the lake split apart...and yet it doesn’t use external chi? Did you not send the chi out of your body?”

Now I understood her confusion.

“That was a shock wave from my fist.”

“A shock wave?”

“What’s important is not that but the sound it made.”

“That noise that sounded like thunder, you mean?”

“Exactly. That is what is emitted when the speed of sound is surpassed. That superspeed movement is what is known as Rumbling Thunder. You step forward and strike. The shock wave is like a nice bonus. What do you think? Seems like something that would suit you.”

In both the match with Gandolph and the match with the Sword Demon, Lynokis had made sure that she’d moved first. Each time, she would forcefully try to win right from the start of the match with a swift initial strike. Rumbling Thunder was a Technique with such speed it could always preemptively strike—exactly how she would like it. It might be a bit lacking against monsters, but against people, it would be more than enough. Hit their torso with it, and it was likely they would die—*instantly*, at that.

“In other words, you turn all of the power of your internal chi into speed?”

“That type of thing is often down to one’s personal perception, so I’ll avoid giving any definitive descriptions. But you can think of it that way if it works for you. The biggest advantage of this Technique is that you can tell if you managed it by listening for the sound. Isn’t that handy?”

But Lynokis did not hear a single word I said—she was already putting in the practice. It appeared she liked it, after all. If she was this determined, then I was sure she could pull it off in even less than a year.

With that out of the way, I would no longer need to disturb her. She could train until she exhausted herself and then return to the villa as she pleased. I would take this opportunity to go visit the king. If I got all the troublesome parts out of the way, I could enjoy my vacation to my heart’s content.

I returned to the villa, leaving Lynokis to be absorbed in her training. Under normal circumstances, she would never leave me alone out in the wild, but either she had come to the conclusion that the island was safe enough to not require her constant presence as a bodyguard, or she was too focused on practicing the Technique. The likely answer was that it was a combination of both.

Lynokis's stubbornness, no, her pure devotion to her job was admirable. She would never accidentally forget she was on duty. We were on an island that royalty frequented; there was no one but allies here. The chances of an intruder were unfathomably low. And even if there were intruders, I'd be totally fine. I was a Valiant Spirit, after all.

Whatever the case, getting Lynokis off my back was perfect.

"Your Majesty."

I found him in the same place as he had been before. There was no one in the king's immediate vicinity as he read his book from where he lay on his deck chair, the pinnacle of sophistication. I could feel a gaze from somewhere far away, most likely his guards. But the distance meant that casual conversation most likely couldn't be overheard. We had the perfect conditions to have a secret discussion.

"What? Don't talk to me," he responded, deep voice devoid of emotion. The sound of him flipping the page in that moment was oddly deafening.

"There is something I wish to discuss with you."

"I have no time to listen to the foolish fantasies of children."

"You are the one who said I should use whatever I have at my disposal."

"Oh...?" The king finally moved from his position. He set his book down on the table, sat up, and turned towards me, lowering his feet onto the ground.

His name is Hyurence Altoire, I believe. Fourteenth king of Altoire. What first caught my attention was that he had the same eyes as Hildetaura: green with a distinctive red inside the pupils. They were said to be proof of their royal lineage, and they really did leave an impression when seen in person. Both the king's and Hildetaura's eyes were very unique, but unlike his daughter's,

Hyurence's eyes were sharp, as if no movement could escape his notice.

His bright blond hair looked pale in comparison to his daughter's, due to the white hairs mixed in. He was in his late forties to early fifties, so it wasn't such a strange age for that sort of change. Interestingly, his hairstyle was also quite unique, with his bangs parted to the left and right and then the bottom of his hair flicking up next to his ears—perhaps he had it curled for official duties.

Still, there was some...indescribable power in his expression. Like an aura of ambition that was similar to the energy martial artists released in battle, or perhaps it was simply the natural sense of intimidation from a ruler. Though you could see his age, that expression was both dignified and brimming with life. With the lack of excess fat on both his face and body, he could very easily pass for being in his thirties.

This man seems like he's both strong and reliable. Both his powerful eyes and his body that had not overindulged in luxury set him apart from your average person.

As both a father and a man, he might be despicable, but not as a king—he was far from a fool. Well, those observations were only concerning his mental capabilities; he wasn't all that strong *physically*, so it would take only a second for me to put him to sleep from this distance. If our conversation went in an unexpected direction, one that seemed more hassle than it was worth, I might have him take a little nap. King he might be, but to me, he was but a whippersnapper—a youngling in comparison.

“You wish to take advantage of *us*? And you have the gall to say this directly to our face? Know your place.” The king's lips were turned up in a fearless smile. He was probably having a bit of fun—despite his words, he wasn't truly rejecting me. Still, it seemed he was the type to adjust the way he spoke depending on if he was dealing with public or private matters.

“Being in a bathrobe doesn't quite give you the same authority, does it?”

The king scoffed at my implication that his speech was nowhere near as persuasive in his current attire. “Hmph, well, do as you please. Don't expect us to remember any of it if you bore us, though.”

I took that to mean, for the time being at least, that he was willing to listen to

me, so I told him everything.

As there was a risk of him getting bored and complaining if I took too long, I told him my desires quickly and concisely:

One: I wanted to hold a martial arts tournament to find Altoire's strongest fighter.

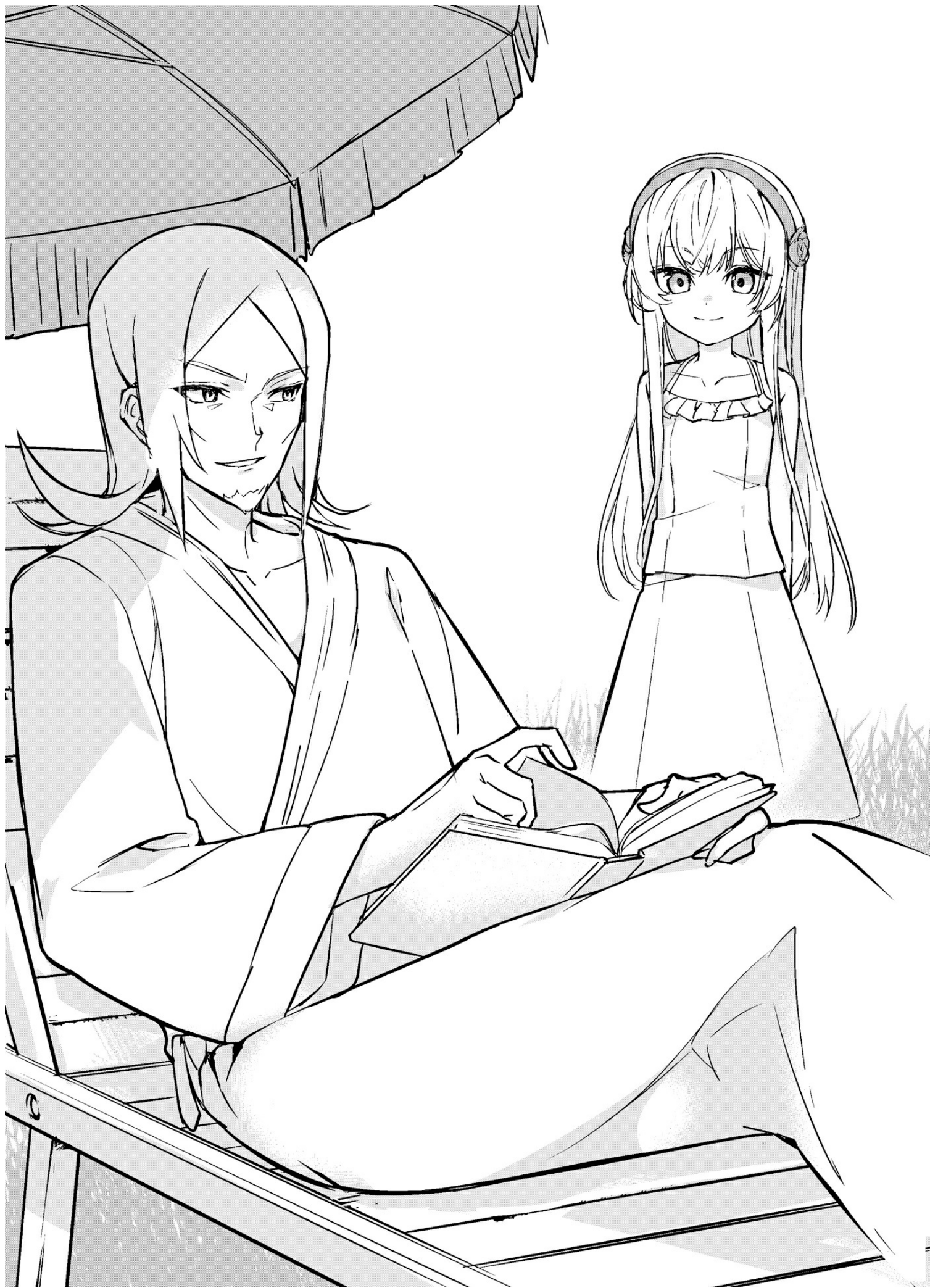
Two: I planned to hold it a year from now.

Three: I needed his help to make that happen.

In summary, those were the three points I raised to him.

"What is your objective for this tournament? If you can't list at least five benefits, then we won't give it even a modicum of thought."

"What? *Five?*" This wasn't quite how I'd expected the conversation to go.



He wasn't a ruling power for nothing, that was for sure. I had walked in thinking two or three positives would've been enough to convince him, but no, he wanted even more.

"Not five. *At least* five. Should we take that to mean this is the end of our discussion?"

"Hm? Now who said that? Of course I have more than five."

We both knew I was bluffing. I hadn't even thought of the bare minimum, and the king had completely seen through me.

"Really, now? State them."

But if our discussion ended here, neither of us would benefit. At the very least, the fact His Majesty was giving me a chance at all meant that he wasn't entirely uninterested in the idea. I had only met him today, but I could already tell that this man would not waste his time on matters that he didn't believe he could benefit from—especially now, when he was on vacation after no doubt finishing a boatload of work. The last thing he would want to do was deal with even more horribly bothersome work. Honestly, I felt the same way; I wanted to ignore all of this and just enjoy my vacation.

If the king saw absolutely no potential in my proposal, he would have put an end to our discussion already. So for now, I had to somehow squeeze out enough benefits to satisfy him.

"First, if you get involved with this project from the planning stages, you can have much more say in its rules and regulations. That would allow you to generate significant financial benefits, right?"

"First, the monetary benefit. Next?"

"The martial arts tournament recently held at Altoire Academy was so popular it has already been rebroadcast several times. If a tournament was able to generate such an impressive response at such a small scale, then you can expect to see massive gains in MagiPad sales if we were to hold one at a nationwide level."

"Can we really expect that?"

“Yes. Though the number of shipments has been small, statistics show that after the school tournament, parents of students—a demographic that had previously not been a part of the consumer market—began purchasing MagiPads themselves. A tournament to decide the strongest fighter in all of Altoire would no doubt gather the attention of many across the land who would want to view it several times. In other words, a whole new market of people wanting to see the tournament again would buy MagiPads so they could view the rebroadcasts.”

“Second, promotion of magivision. Next?”

Crap... I'm already out of ideas.

“Now, now, no need to rush me. Let's take our time. Shall I massage your shoulders for you?”

“Were you a fine beauty or an emissary from a foreign country, perhaps we would take you up on that offer. However, we don't care to partake in friendly conversation with children.”

Not surprising. Well, I was pretty sure he already knew exactly what I was thinking, so I might as well be honest.

“I can't list any more.”

“Hey, are you not giving up a little early?”

“Yes, I am.” Even I thought I'd given up way too quickly. But could you blame me? I hadn't started this conversation thinking I'd be asked for this much information. I wasn't good at using my head for anything other than headbutts. “If I had to list any other benefits, I suppose there's the fact that I'm looking forward to it... Actually, does it excite you as well, Your Majesty?”

“Nia Liston. You're mocking us, aren't you?” The king's sharp gaze held a pressure that would have crushed a regular child. He had quite the power in those eyes of his. If the child in front of him had been anyone but me, they'd no doubt have been bawling right about now.

“But it does excite you, yes? You're curious to see who the strongest in your own country is, right?” A regular child would have backed down in tears, but I was perfectly fine. Worse came to worst, all I'd have to do was give him a slight

chop on the neck.

“No. We have no interest in who is strong.” The king’s response surprised me. I began doubting my ears.

“Huh? Why? Don’t all men seek power at some point in their lives? Doesn’t the thought of the tournament bring those feelings back for you?”

“Are you done? If so, leave.”

What? Does he really have no interest? Seriously? Unbelievable. Could someone like this really exist? I stared at him, still in a state of disbelief—until the king finally gave an exaggerated sigh.

“*Of course* there are other benefits,” he said in exasperation. “If we were to hold this event nationally, then we could invite foreign guests. It would serve as a way to show off our strongest but also as a foothold to sell magivision to other countries. Should the opportunity arise, we could even forge agreements with friendly countries to have their programs be broadcast in Altoire as well. Promotion of magivision internationally is not something that can simply be bought, which makes it one of the greatest benefits of a project like this.”

The king continued, “Naturally, we would also see an increase in foreign spending. I imagine we could take that opportunity to observe the flight technology of the Empire of Flight, Vanderouge. It would tie in to my children’s marriage prospects as well. The larger the tournament, the greater the reputation and value it will add to the kingdom.”

“Finally,” he said, “depending on our strategy, it could put us in a very favorable position. If we show that we have strength to be proud of, skilled adventurers will hear of us and come work here. They would explore the untouched floating islands and find ways to secure new resources. Does that sound about right?”

Honestly...he’d lost me when he’d mentioned it being a national event. He said all that without taking a single break.

“Woow, you’re amazing, Your Majesty. So smart! You’re a genius!” That was all I could bring myself to say.

“You *are* mocking me, aren’t you?” For some reason, he was glaring quite

ferociously at me.

“Father!” Just as an inexplicable silence fell between us, Hildetaura came running over from the villa. Seemed I’d been caught. “Nia is only six years old! She is younger than me! What kind of freak do you have to be to make moves on a young child?!”

Wait, there seemed to be a grave misunderstanding here.

“Why would I do that? The legal age of marriage is fifteen. I only seduce talented beauties and pretty women of at least that age.”

Hey, Your Majesty, that’s not what you should be arguing against.

“She has the guts and the courage to not only make a direct appeal to me but even *make fun of me*—the king—without fear, despite being a young child. It would be a shame to let her go. An excellent woman should give birth to my excellent children so we can increase our excellent people.”

Oops, that was close. I nearly slapped him out of reflex. Nearly slammed my hand right across that face of his. I would probably have outright *punched* him if he’d said that to any child other than me.

I could see now that the rumors of the king’s love for women was rooted in his desire to leave behind talented successors. It didn’t even seem like some excuse to hide his proclivities—it really did feel like it was purely because the king wanted to leave behind exceptional children. He was a man that barely felt any emotion towards his family, after all. I wouldn’t be surprised if he only viewed sleeping with women as one of his kingly duties.

All of that said...

“Is this man right in the head?” I asked, looking over at Hildetaura, whose expression was angrier than I’d ever seen it.

“That’s exactly why I did not want you to meet. You can tell for yourself, right?”

“Yup. He really isn’t safe.”

Even his daughter didn’t view him as safe. No wonder Hildetaura would always get so upset whenever her father came up in conversation.

“Hmph. Only a king can understand a king’s mind.” Having been accused of not being right in the head by two children, His Majesty turned his back on us and lay down on his deck chair. The sight of a middle-aged man presenting his sadness felt much like a father sulking that his beloved daughter had treated him like a nuisance. Not that the latter part was inaccurate, but I couldn’t say if there was any love involved.

“Nia Liston,” the lonely back uttered. “I had been considering the same idea as you. I believe it is yet too early, but I have no complaints about putting things in motion. If you’re prepared, you should strike while the iron is hot.”

Does he mean that he will cooperate with my plan for the tournament?

“Your biggest obstacle is the funds. By my estimates, it will take you at least one hundred million krams.”

Hmm, a hundred million krams...

“A-A hundred million?! Nia, what were you even discussing?!” Hildetaura’s surprise was no doubt related to the sum of money, but to be honest, I had no real grasp on the value of this country’s currency. I never did any shopping by myself, and if I saw something I wanted, Lynokis would buy it with the allowance that I had been saving. And even then, I would buy something once or twice a month at best—generally school supplies. I had no idea how much money I had nor had I ever even *touched* money.

“Keep in mind I said ‘at least.’ Personally, I would want ten times that. It’s worth pouring that much into, so it would benefit from an even bigger budget. If you’re going to do it, you should go all out.”

That would bring it up to one billion krams. Hildetaura was once more horrified—likely because this was also an insane amount of money.

“As for when you should hold it, two years from now would be ideal. Take a year making the basic preparations, and then use the second year to gather participants from around the kingdom and to send invites to foreign countries. But as much as I can make a road map, we are hopelessly lacking in the funds. I could consider a fifty-million-kram down payment, maybe two hundred million if I were to classify it as a public good... However, the entertainment aspect of this tournament is transparent enough that using tax money on such an event

would only invite animosity from the lower classes. This whole thing is a fool's errand. I can see the possibility of it succeeding, but a possibility is just that. I am not in a position that I can take massive risks."

So to summarize, we needed the money in order for this plan to work.

"In other words, if I am able to raise a hundred million or even one billion krams, we'll be able to hold the tournament, and you'll be willing to assist me?"

"Assist you? Don't make me laugh. If I have the requisite funds, then naturally, I will take over your plan in whatever way I must. If we intend to make this an international event, then it only makes sense that I lead it."

Very interesting.

"Then all I have to do is raise the money, yes?" This was honestly the best outcome I could ask for.

Thinking about all the complicated stuff had never been my strong suit. If all I had to do was hand over the money, it made my job much easier. Even if I had the money, I couldn't make something like this a reality on my own. On the other hand, if there was someone who would take on all the logistics if I just handed money over to them, of course I wouldn't complain.

What was more, said partner was the king—even if he *wanted* to simply run away with the money, he was the most important person in the country, so there was no way he could disappear. Discreetly saving some money on the side to help with the Liston family's financial troubles wasn't such a bad idea either...for emergencies.

Now that I thought about it...if I wanted to help with the family's financial troubles, it would be way faster for me to earn the cash directly rather than going through this convoluted process of investing in magivision.

"Hildetaura."

"Y-Yes?"

The king called out to his daughter, back still turned, and her voice hiked high in surprise.

"You will be the point of contact between me and Nia Liston. If she has

anything she wishes to say to me, you will pass that message to me directly with the highest priority. Do you understand?”

“What is this all about anyway...? Why are we talking about such massive sums of money?”

“It’s the amount of money she’ll be accumulating. Ask her if you want the details.” With that, the king returned to his book.

I explained the idea of the national tournament to Hildetaura after we were some distance away.

“Ah... I understand now.” She understood that the king’s proposed price for the event must have been reasonable. The real question was...just how much money was that exactly?

“Excuse me? You want to know the value of one billion krams? Hm, what would make for a good point of comparison...? Medium-sized airships tend to go for about one hundred million a ship, so you could probably buy a small floating island with ten times that.”

That comparison wasn’t helpful either.

“Nia, are you sure you want to take this on? One billion krams is an amount of money that most people will never see in their lifetime, no matter how desperately they work.”

“It’ll all work out.”

“But will it?! Do you think that amount of money is going to just drop in your lap?!”

“If I have to make a billion in two years, that makes an annual goal of five hundred million.”

“Why are you acting like this is nothing?! I just said that most people will not see that amount of money in their lifetimes!”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll work hard.”

“Hard work only earns you so much!”

It was almost time for lunch. Since we'd arrived so early, only about half of the day had passed. I returned to my room, where Lynokis had retired after she had exhausted herself with her training, and told her about what I'd discussed with the king.

"One billion krams in two years? That's impossible." She had already bathed and gotten changed into her regular attendant attire, and when I confided in her, she gave me the same response as Hildetaura. "Then again, knowing you, it may actually be possible."

Had she suddenly remembered that I was a Valiant Spirit possessing a girl's body? *It seems completely possible, right? If I take down some random monster that looks valuable, I can make a massive amount of money overnight.* It helped that I had unexpectedly gained the backing of a person as strong as the king himself—I really wanted to bring all of this to fruition.

"There's two key routes I could take for this."

"Two?"

"Hunting monsters, or exploring islands." There really was nothing else that could lead to faster financial gain that would be feasible for me.

"Well, given how lofty the goal is, we certainly wouldn't be able to achieve it with regular work."

Exactly. Hildetaura had said that it wasn't an amount we could acquire through good, honest work. In that case, the only choice left was to take on something that would earn us a whole pile of cash at once.

"To be honest," Lynokis continued, "I don't think this is an amount you can ever hope to make by yourself. This is the kind of money you can only make from general stores, long-standing businesses, patents, or other such large forms of business."

Wow, it was *that* large a sum of money? Even with that in mind, though, I still struggled to understand just how much a billion krams really was.

"How much is your salary, Lynokis?"

"Young Mistress, that isn't something you ask so... Oh, I see. Do excuse me. I

receive about four hundred thousand krams from the Liston family a month.” Having realized I wasn’t simply asking out of curiosity, Lynokis easily gave me an answer.

“And is that on the higher side as far as wages go?”

“As an attendant of the Liston family, yes. When I was first hired, I was being asked to act as your carer as much as your attendant, so I worked long hours. They adjusted my wages accordingly. Though I no longer act as your carer, I do have to remain by your side at all times while you are at school. As such, that evens it out to around the same as I was receiving while you were ill.”

Hmm, so four hundred thousand krams a month was already deemed a lot...

“How much do commoners receive?”

“That depends, I would think. I’ve heard that three hundred thousand a month is on the higher side before, but this is something that varies depending on occupation, so I would struggle to give an absolute answer.”

“If I were to calculate based on that level of income, one billion krams is really quite a lot, isn’t it?”

“Most certainly. It isn’t a number that an average person would ever expect to see.”

Suddenly, I understood exactly why Hildetaura had been as surprised as she was.

“While on the topic, my monthly allowance is around five thousand krams, right?”

“Since entering school, it has been raised to ten thousand a month.”

It had increased, had it? Not that I had much use for it. Though...I had no idea if this was a lot for a child’s allowance or not. For all I knew, it was completely normal.

Now for the most important part of the discussion.

“Are there any monsters that are worth one billion krams?” My understanding of the value of money didn’t matter—what was important was that I find a method to raise one billion krams in two years. If possible, I’d love

to be able to make it all at once.

“I’m not sure about in the billions, but there are several A-tier monsters valued in the millions.”

“Those sound like good targets.”

“I don’t think it will be as simple as you seem to believe...”

Well, there had to be a reason that they were worth that much money. But the task’s complexity wouldn’t change the fact that I had no choice but to do it. I had considered holding the tournament in a year, but the king had proposed two years. In other words, since the time I had to prepare the money had doubled, I could take things much slower than I’d originally planned. If we moved in a swift but calculated manner, we could definitely raise one billion krams in time. And thinking on it further, it actually came with a whole different benefit.

“Hey, Lynokis. You said you would devote your body and soul to me, right?” At least, I was sure she had said that to me at some point. At the time, I had thought it unnecessary, but now things were different.

“What?! Y-Yes, absolutely!”

“In that case— Wait, you don’t need to take your clothes off. Don’t. Please don’t. I just told you not to.”

Why did she start to strip? This student of mine still never failed to make me even more suspicious of her.

“This is a sign of my sincerity.”

Her nakedness was? What sincerity? What would stripping do? *Why* did she strip?

Best to just ignore her. I would only tire myself out if I took her too seriously.

“Then pay me tribute. About a billion krams,” I ordered.

“I’m sorry, but...even if I were to take out all my savings, I would only be able to give you about ten million krams... Never mind, I understand. I’ll go gambling...”

“That’s not what I mean.” I stood up off the seat, gathered the clothes that Lynokis had thrown everywhere, and shoved them back at her. *This isn’t the time to be stripping naked, my dear student!*

“I want you to become an adventurer while I’m at school and build up your name,” I explained. “It would serve as good training until the tournament, and it will serve us well in the short term too. ‘I hear there’s a really strong adventurer!’ ‘An adventurer who struck gold and earned a billion krams in record time has appeared!’ I want you to become so famous that rumors like those spread and you get so much attention that even foreign countries learn your name. You will become a walking advertisement. Then, you’ll hype up the tournament with your presence and win. Really, I would much prefer to do it myself, but it’s impossible for me while I’m still a child, so I leave it to you. Do it for me.”

“I don’t mind doing all that, but...being away from you for so long? There is so much I need to assist you with...”

“You don’t need to stay with me *all* the time while I’m at school, do you? For small things like cleaning my room or doing my laundry, it would be easy enough to have Lynette stand in when she’s free, and there *is* a janitor for the dorm, as well.”

Though my brother’s personal attendant lived in a separate dorm, it was still in the vicinity. She would be free while Neal was at class too, so I was sure she would help if we asked. Even if she didn’t, I could figure something out.

“Who would accompany you to your magivision shoots?”

“The production crew, of course. They’re always with me. If I need help, they’re always willing to assist, and you have nothing to do during recordings most of the time anyway.”

“Excuse me, I am doing the very important job of watching you work hard!”
If that’s all she’s doing, then it’s definitely fine.

“You don’t need to do that, so please just raise the money. Do it for me.”

“Young Mistress, I...” As she took her clothes back, Lynokis’s eyebrows knitted together, her pained face a mix of sadness and embarrassment. “I really do love

this selfish and forceful side of yours...”

Really now. I didn’t think she had to look so embarrassed as she said it, though.

A short while later, around lunchtime, Hildetaura came to my room. Having anticipated that we would be in for a long conversation, she brought food to my room so we could eat while we talked. She had tried to get Reliared to join us, but Reliared was still refusing to leave her room, so the princess had given up.

“Now, how do you intend to acquire one billion krams?” she asked.

“This is where Lynokis comes in...”

Our discussion continued until well after we’d finished our lunch.

“I believe this is all we need to discuss.”

More specifically, our chat had continued all the way into the evening. I should have expected this would happen, but all the problems that I had only vaguely considered how to deal with—“It’ll work out somehow”—had now been cleaned up with no issue with just a bit of advice from Hildetaura. All that was left was to put the plan into action.

“Given it is related to magivision, I would love to assist you, but...”

“It’s no problem. This is something I want to do myself.”

“But I cannot leave you to do everything! At least, that is what I would like to say, but the most I could provide is around five million krams... It is a far cry from a billion krams. I doubt it would be of much help.”

Despite how she was talking, that was quite the considerable sum for a girl as young as her to give.

“It’s all right. Every little bit helps.”

“Hm? Oh, so you do intend to accept my money?”

“And tell His Majesty: if he has the money to spare, give me fifty million krams.”

“U-Um? I can bring it up to him, but there is no guarantee he would agree to

it.”

“It’s fine. He already said he could.”

“I did overhear that, but he was not saying that he would give away his money without conditions. He’d said it as a hypothetical... Well, I will at least relay this to him.”

And that left nine hundred and thirty-five million krams left, since Lynokis had said she would donate ten million, as well. I would like to use my own allowance to help, but I didn’t even know how much money I had. My discussion with Hildetaura had made it clear what I needed to do, and with her connections, I would be able to save up my money. Our vacation was important, but we also needed to take the time to consider our plans moving forward.

I needed to make my own preparations as well.

The day after I had raised the idea of the martial arts tournament, I began moving in earnest.

First, Lynokis’s training of her Technique—she already had the form down, so if she trained seriously for about a week, she should reach the stage where she could begin firing some out by chance. She was already adjusting to it well, likely because it suited her existing style.

I sat in meditation not far away from her. I had to get this body adjusted to chi—all eight forms of it—so I could defeat A-tier monsters with ease. *I wonder how much of my old intuition from my past life I can tap into during this vacation?* Personally, my body was still too young to go much further with my training, but now wasn’t the time for me to be worrying about that. If possible, I’d like to go to the dungeon that was meant to be on this island and get in some actual experience. But given this was an island for royalty, there was a good chance the entrance was securely sealed for safety.

I might have to give up on the dungeon and focus entirely on training.

“Young Mistress, should we call it here for the day?”

“You can go ahead. I plan to meditate here for the whole day.”

“What?”

This was what I had wanted to do for so long. There had honestly been no time for me to fit in the deep meditation that Lynokis loved so much. Meditation was one of the activities I had considered for my vacation itinerary. Now that things were in motion for the martial arts tournament, leisure could no longer be high on the priority list—I had to start training more.

“If you aren’t going back, then there’s no way I can...”

“Oh, you’d like to meditate too, then? You’re so dedicated.”

“Ha ha... Yeah...”

“You *love* meditation, after all.”

“Ha ha ha...”

We were on day three of our vacation.

“Urgh... I’m sorry, Young Mistress...”

Lynokis was out for the count. She was crawling towards me, face pale, clearly tired as her eyes refused to open, her trembling muscles showing signs of fatigue—all because she’d stuck out the meditation. Having been forced to its limits, her body couldn’t recover over a single night.

Maybe I went a bit too far...

I had been so excited to do some proper meditation after so long, and she had forced herself to accompany me—but it seemed that had been a bit too much for her current skill level.

“Rest for now.”

“I apologize. I will make sure I can at least stand by the afternoon...”

“Just rest already. You don’t need to do anything today.”

“Will you co-sleep with m— Bwuh!”

I threw Lynokis back into bed as she started babbling nonsense in her half-awake state and then left the room.

As this was the royal family's private island, the villa's rooms naturally came with neighboring rooms for the servants, just like the dorms at the academy. This seemed to be the Kingdom of Altoire's default way of handling aristocrat accommodations. Any guests they invited were likely also aristocrats, after all.

That aside, the villa had its own staff, so I could survive without Lynokis for a day. Unfortunately, she would be unable to carry out her incredibly important role of keeping an eye on me, but there was nothing we could do about it! What an absolute shame! I truly wished she could watch over me all the time, but things happened sometimes!

"Heh heh heh."

The corridor was designed to allow in plenty of natural light, with large windows all along the way. I couldn't help but laugh as I looked up at the clear, blue sky.

I can't say I planned for this to happen, yet I've managed to make time without Lynokis watching me anyway. How fortunate that I would find time on this vacation to be without someone constantly looking over my shoulder. I was free. I could do whatever I wanted. Now, how would I use this precious time?

Oh, but of course—there was supposed to be a dungeon on this island, wasn't there?

There's no ulterior motive to this question, but where is it?

There's no ulterior motive to this question, but whom should I ask?

There's no ulterior motive to this question, but do you think I should go take a look?

There's no ulterior motive to this question, but if I could enter—

"Nia!" As I began fantasizing about everything I could now do, Reliared came running up with her attendant in tow. She appeared to have gathered herself after the shock of seeing the king, and now she was full of life. Good, that was how children should be.

"Good morning, Relia."

"Morning. You were thinking of something crazy and violent just now, weren't

you? You were making that face again.”

We’d just reunited after a whole day, and *that* was the first thing she thought to say to me? Either she had good instincts or she was that good at reading people... She’d even seen through me when I’d started thinking of those paper plays. Or maybe I completely lacked a poker face. Was it really that obvious what I was thinking?

“I was not.”

All I had been thinking was that I wanted to go and give the dungeon a look. I was thinking that I might want to slip into the place while I was there and beat to death two or three nasty orcs and lewd tentacled monsters. I wouldn’t be causing anyone any trouble—I really was only thinking about some trivial matters that no one needed to be informed of. No blood would be shed...at least, not mine.

“Really? Well, whatever. I just came to say that we should go swimming after breakfast! Apparently, there’s a really pretty lake nearby!”

The one that Lynokis and I had been training by yesterday and the day before? We were going to go swimming there?

“No, I’m...” I had suddenly acquired some long-awaited free time, so no ulterior motives or anything, but I wanted to pop off to the dungeon...

“Join us! You were out all day yesterday. Didn’t you promise you’d play with me and Miss Hilde this whole vacation?”

I... Yeah. Yeah, I had. When it was finalized that we would be spending our last days on this island after all, we’d all chatted about everything we wanted to do. There was so much we wanted to do that we’d ended up failing to settle on a specific schedule, so instead, I’d promised that we would do everything that came to mind while we were there.

I couldn’t break a promise, could I? I didn’t want to play around with children, but I did want to protect them. Reliared and Hildetaura were like my granddaughters, after all. They were precious. I had abandoned everything for the sake of martial arts in my past life...I thought. But in this life, living as Nia Liston, I couldn’t afford to do that.

My previous life hadn't been anything special. Though I barely had my memories, I was certain of that. Contrary to what I had believed, the absolute pinnacle of martial arts was pointless—nothing was there upon reaching it. That had to be why I appeared to have no memories pertaining to it, not even one.

So this life, for certain, I wanted to live while keeping close what I held dear. Though...maybe I was still a little young to be deciding how I wanted to live my life.

“All right, then. Let's go swimming.”

Training would be on hold for now. What a shame. Maybe I could swim really vigorously instead.

Oh, His Majesty is here.

When we arrived at the dining room, sitting there was none other than the king himself. He was wearing a bathrobe yet again. Had he already bathed? He had finished his meal and was now enjoying some tea in front of his empty plate. It had been established that we could ignore him, but it only seemed right to at least give a greeting now that we had bumped into each other, didn't it?

“Hey. Kids.”

As I was considering what to do, he decided for us.

“Go gather mushrooms from the forest,” he ordered, barely glancing in our direction.

“Excuse me?” I asked in confusion. Where was this coming from?

“We'll be having a barbecue for today's lunch. We need mushrooms to grill with the meat, so get picking.”

That was all he said before he stood up and walked off.

Huh? Mushrooms? A barbecue?

“Wh... Huh?” Reliared, who had hidden behind me as soon as she'd seen the king, looked just as confused by his unintelligible orders. Well, they weren't unintelligible; we knew exactly what he had asked from us, since he had been very clear about what he wanted us to do and why.

“Good morning. Is something the matter?” Hildetaura greeted us as we stood there in bewilderment. When I explained what the king had asked of us, she sighed. “That is his attempt at being considerate.”

That was him being *considerate*?

“He does not understand how to interact with children. But it seems he does want to treat you well while you are here. Barbecues are the only thing that man likes to do himself.”

I...see. It was probably best I didn’t think too hard about it—I already knew that he wasn’t right in the head. I would simply make a note that this was the kind of man he was.

“Why would he tell us to go pick mushrooms, then?” I asked.

“It is his way of going, ‘I was thinking we could have a barbecue together! So I’ll need you to go gather some ingredients for me.’”

In other words, he was trying to be nice.

I nodded at Hildetaura’s explanation. “Then let’s go gather some.”

“Do we *have* to...?” Reliared grumbled.

“We can go for a swim in the afternoon. Right, Hilde?”

“I do apologize for my father. Please, if you could entertain his selfish desires just this once...”

“Y-Yes, well... I understand.” Reliared was clearly still reluctant even as she agreed to Hildetaura’s request.

And so we spent our morning going along with an adult’s selfish whims.

After finishing breakfast, we found a staff member who was knowledgeable on foraging for edible plants and headed for the nearby forest.

We searched for mushrooms...

“Here’s one!”

“Relia, that’s a poisonous mushroom. The kind that’s dangerous even to the touch. Like royalty.”

“Nia, that was an awfully scathing remark.”



Gathered nuts and berries...

"Is this a berry, Nia?"

"No, those are the eggs of a red mantis."

"EW?!"

"Nia, no. Those are regular red berries."

"Nia... Come here a second."

Found some wood that would be good for kindling...

"Nia, look at this. What do you think it is?"

"Uh... Some good wood?"

"No, this is the holy sword, Aroinglas, used to slay Vizicyus, the God of Death who roamed the Dark Sea."

"I see..."

"Now be gone, white-haired darkness!"

"GRAAAAAAAH! You dare slash that accursed blade of light through my stomach! My blood and guts are scattered everywhere! What an unsightly death!"

"Oops... I summoned the actress."

"You are very good at playing along, Nia."

Spotted wild animals...

"Ah, look! A squirrel!"

"Shall I catch it for you, Relia?"

"The branches are far too high. Of course you cannot catch that."

"This is nothing. Shall I catch it? It looks like it would taste nice."

"Perhaps we should change the subject, Miss Hilde..."

"Yes... Or Nia may end up actually chasing it."

Catching bugs...

“Relia, there’s a bug right by you.”

“EEK! Not a big spider!”

“Looks like a bullfinch spider.”

“Is it edible, Hilde?”

“I do not believe they are poisonous, so...yes?”

“Then let’s take thi—”

“Stop, Nia!”

“But we were asked to find food, Relia.”

“And that isn’t food! We already know they have meat and vegetables! We don’t need to gather things you’d need to force yourself to eat!”

“Really? I wanted you to try it so bad, though. Not that I was planning to eat it.”

“Nia, seriously, come over here a second.”

“You two sure are good friends.”

Walking around foraging in the dew-scented forest was actually quite fun. Watching children run around and enjoy themselves warmed my heart.

Peaceful times like this can be nice too.

We returned to the villa, gave the ingredients we had foraged to one of the servants, and then took a small break. After that, we decided to change into our swimsuits and do some stretches so we would be able to go for a dip if the opportunity presented itself, and headed towards the lake where the barbecue would be held. It turned out it wasn’t the lake where I had been training with Lynokis but a lake that was right next to the villa. I didn’t particularly mind either way.

“Hey, you little brats! Get over here! We’re gonna start cooking the meat!”

Waiting for us when we arrived was an old man, all excited, still in a bathrobe. It was the king. His face was red so I imagined he had already partaken in alcohol. I couldn’t be sure when he had started drinking, but given his state, he

had to have been at it for quite a while.

“Father, are preparations for the barbecue complete?”

When Hildetaura asked her question, the king grabbed the tankard sitting beside him, took a swig, and then exhaled. “We were waiting for you three. How rude of you to keep the king of Altoire waiting. As punishment, you must fall head over heels for us!”

Well at least His Majesty was enjoying his vacation.

“Yes, yes, we apologize, Your Majesty. Please cook the meat,” his daughter said sarcastically.

“You betcha! You better make sure you’re eatin’ your vegetables too!”

And so, the barbecue began.

He would grill the meat, then we would eat it. He would grill the meat. We would eat. Under the blue sky on the edge of the lake, we ate a pile of delicious meat and vegetables.

This kind of life isn’t bad either, I found myself thinking.

I didn’t hate pretentious restaurants, but having this sort of simple food sometimes was nice. Effort had been put into the preparation of the meat and vegetables, so there was a little bit more work put into it than just grilling it all as is, but the standards were different than those of a professional establishment.

Still, I wasn’t sure if I should be surprised, but the king was the one grilling the food the whole time—sometimes stealing little bits for himself—and joyfully chugging down his beer. Perhaps this was simply a sign that he loved barbecues in particular.

What had started as just us three girls and the king grew to include many more of the servants of the house as well—naturally, they joined in the feast. The servants were drinking and laughing while the king was drinking and grilling. Even Reliared’s attendant had grabbed herself a plate at some point.

It wasn’t a bad sight.

“Stop yer yappin’ and eat! Drink! I’ll grill all of it for you!” More than once, a servant would come along and try to take over grilling the food, but he was stubborn and refused to leave his spot. Still drinking.

Man... I really want some beer too. Don’t drink so happily in front of me like that.

While here, His Majesty truly wasn’t His Majesty.

“Huh? You sayin’ you can grill meat better than us?” the king spat at the latest man to approach him.

Well, he is literally your chef, so yes. And stop using the royal we. Don’t intimidate them with the crown. Stop drinking so much alcohol. You’re getting way too carried away. He really was embarrassing to watch.

I had already had quite a lot of food, and Reliared had gone for a nap in the shade, while Hildetaura was fishing with some of her servants. *I suppose I should find something to do myself.* Maybe I could go for a swim as some light postmeal exercise. I was wearing my swimsuit after all.

“Excuse me, do you have a harpoon? I’d like to go spear some fish,” I asked one of the villa’s staff. If Hildetaura was fishing, then that had to mean there were fish in the lake. They were actually catching fish with the intent to grill them later, so it didn’t seem to be for show, so it would be worth going for a little look.

“Ah, well, we really can’t give something so sharp to a child...” However, the employee was reluctant. I supposed I *was* still a child. An adult with any common sense would never give me a harpoon.

“That’s fine. I’m going to go for a swim, then.”

If I were in possession of the weapon, I could easily find some way to explain away my catch when people asked, but if they wouldn’t loan one to me at all, then that was fine. I’d just catch them by hand. I could avoid damaging the fish this way too. Who needed tools?

“Don’t go out too far, okay? Don’t swim too deep either.”

Yes, yes, I’ll be careful.

After doing some light stretches, I dived into the lake. At first, I was a little afraid I wouldn't be able to swim, but it seemed I had subconsciously remembered how. Rather than understanding the mechanics and techniques of swimming, I simply remembered how to use my body. It seemed I wouldn't have any problems for now.

It really was a beautiful lake. The cool water was refreshing on my tanned skin. The lake was so clear I could very easily see what was under the surface, and I soon spotted some shadows that looked like fish. *While I'm here, I may as well aim for a big one.*

I swam leisurely through the lake as I searched for my prey. It was a nice bit of light exercise to help with digestion. The water wasn't difficult to swim through either. *Maybe I should swim a bit faster...*

The lake was surprisingly wide, and it seemed to go fairly deep. The sensible servants on the shore were keeping an eye on me, so I couldn't go very far—on the surface. But how could they know where I was while underwater? I could swim all the way to the other side of the lake, or even examine the lake floor, and they'd never know. All I had to do was make sure I swam back to the shallow parts of the lake when I came back up for breath, just to show to the staff that I was all right and had most definitely not gone very far nor swam to the depths.

For the first time in a while, Lynokis wasn't with me. I took the opportunity to spread my wings a bit.

With that decided, I came up for air for a moment, waved at the staff watching me so I could make them aware of my presence, and then dived back under. I swam deep, using blunt chi to create an invisible foothold and kicking off of it to propel myself forward.

The underwater scenery flew by. My view twirled around. Using chi allowed me to explore much faster. I decided to try chasing some fish for fun. I used blunt chi with my hands and feet to direct myself and swam alongside the fleeing fish. If I tried, I could swim even faster than them.

I grabbed one, confirmed I had caught it, and then released it; no harm done. I seemed to be able to move more than sufficiently in this young body.

Perhaps I could even skywalk at this— Oh?

It turned out I had made it quite deep without realizing. The water was a dark indigo blue, impossible to see far through, and the lake floor was covered in settled dirt. I felt a presence ahead of me, and when I squinted, a large shadow jumped out at me.

It was a massive fish, one much bigger than me. Actually, was it a crocodile? It kind of looked like one. Or...no, maybe it was a fish, after all? While I was debating with myself as to its identity, the massive crocodile-like fish swam towards me, maw opened wide. It must have been the kind of predator that would lie in wait for its prey instead of actively pursuing it.

The ability of wild animals to hide their presence was truly extraordinary. I'd barely felt it. Still, it posed no threat to me, though.

I flicked the water with a finger.

Thuck!

The impact burst in the fish's open mouth with a sound that echoed even through the depths of the water. Numerous sharp teeth shattered, and the fish desperately writhed and struggled as it made its escape. It must have been taken aback by the unexpected counterattack.



Now then, there were certainly no complaints about the size, but could you eat that fish? It had tried to go after me, so that made it an omnivore, right? If it was both an omnivore and a fish swimming around in the muddy depths, we definitely wouldn't be able to eat it as it was. I would at least need it to spit out all the mud in its system.

Rather than spending my time catching a fish I wasn't even sure if we could eat, it would be a much better use of my time to catch a yummy fish that I knew we could grill and eat safely... I wanted to have some grilled fish too—just a simple grilled fish with some salt sprinkled on top. I'd been a little sick of the lightly salted food I'd received while I was ill, but now that I was past that, I could say that I liked the taste now.

Just as I decided I would let the fish go...it suddenly disappeared. Naturally I couldn't see it after it had swum farther into the deep blue, but that wasn't the issue. The issue was that I couldn't even *sense* it. The presence of that large fish had simply gone completely. Was it eaten by another fish? Had it hidden its presence and gone back to lying in wait for prey under the ground?

No, that doesn't seem right. I didn't sense it making those sorts of movements either. And that is very interesting. Let's go on a little investigation, shall we?

I came back up for breath to reassure the staff that I was still alive, then dived back down to where I had been. I went to examine the exact location that the fish had disappeared.

It must have something to do with this rock wall.

Deep under the water on the lake floor, there was an area with large rocks piled on top of each forming one large wall. It was somewhere around here that the presence of the large fish had disappeared.

Hmm... It doesn't look as if there's anything unusual. There were small fish and crabs that had taken residence in the gaps between the rocks, but there was no gap large enough for that fish to fit into. No predator big enough to take down something so big could have been hiding in there either.

I didn't get it. The fact its presence disappeared had to mean that it had either been eaten or hidden itself. If it'd been eaten, did that mean there *was* an even

bigger fish down here? Or had it been nibbled to death by a whole school of greedy small fish? Neither possibility seemed very likely. There didn't appear to be any large predators or large schools of fish nearby, and that meant it was much more likely that the fish had hidden somewhere. I'd really never felt it make any movements akin to diving under the dirt, though, which meant...

Thinking logically, it only made sense it must be somewhere around this rock wall. If its presence had disappeared, then that had to mean it had gone to a new location...right? What was going on? *Maybe I should inspect this wall more closely.*

I tried running my hands over one of the stones, but I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary. I tried the next one. Nothing. I continued until I had examined a whole row of them. I knew roughly where the fish's presence had disappeared, so it shouldn't take too long to examine any areas of interest—

Ah.

I'd phased through. I thought I was about to touch stone and then my fingers went through with no resistance. I couldn't feel anything and yet my arm was quite literally inside of it. *This is an illusion.* The stone looked like it was a part of the wall, but in reality, there was nothing there. That fish must have escaped through here.

Why the illusion, though? Was this someone's camouflage magic? Or...

My investigation had suddenly become way more interesting. It seemed I would be able to enjoy a little adventure. It would be even more fun if there turned out to be some powerful monster down here.

First though, a swim to the surface for some breath and to let everyone know I was alive was necessary. It was already getting quite annoying, especially since I could last longer than this, but if I didn't pop my head out here and there, I'd just make everyone worry. The last thing I wanted was to cause a ruckus because they thought I'd gone missing.

I'll check this out as soon as I've checked in.

At least, that had been my intention.

"Young Mistress! Young Mistress!"

I heard someone calling for me when I came above water around where I had submerged.

That someone was Lynokis. The moment she spotted me, she started waving. *She's already recovered? I guess this is where my free time comes to an end...* If I'd known there would be something this interesting to check out, I would've put her to sleep much more thoroughly.

"That's much too far! Please play closer to the shore!" Her instructions were perfectly sensible, but saying it with this timing was just too cruel. *At least do it before I discover there's a mysterious rock wall under the lake. Guess I give up here...*

No! I'd found something so interesting—like hell I'd give up! It'd keep bothering me if I didn't at least check what was on the other side of that illusion! In which case...there was only one path!

"Lynokis!" I called out to her as loud as I could, beckoning her over. I still felt regret over the events of the Umbral Arena. I would never go to a dangerous location without permission again. If it was during a time when Lynokis wasn't watching over me, I wouldn't think twice about it, but I absolutely needed to refrain from going off on my own while she was on duty. Since that was currently the case, I should just take her with me.

"I'll be right over!" Lynokis happily flung off her attendant's uniform—a swimsuit hidden underneath—and then dived into the lake with beautiful form. It was the swimsuit she had bought for herself alongside my own, when she had excitedly said that we should swim together if the chance arose. She must have come dressed in it with the hopes that this would be that chance.

After making a beeline for me, Lynokis came to a stop by grabbing my shoulder.

"Are you not very good at swimming?" I asked. If this were her usual unnecessary skinship, I would have shaken her off, but this was different. Her expression was not one of someone who was swimming with ease.

"I-I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit it, but I don't know how to tread water..."

In other words, she only knew how to swim forward.

“In fact, why are you so stable, Young Mistress? You aren’t bobbing up and down at all—it’s like you’re standing on a platform.” We were far enough out that the water went deep and the lake bed was way below us. Lynokis’s feet couldn’t touch the ground, so neither could mine.

“You’re not wrong to perceive me as standing. I’m creating a platform under my feet with external chi.”

“What? That sounds so convenient...”

You could even fly through the sky if you knew how to make appropriate use of chi—that was the kind of skill this was. You were screwed if you couldn’t also manage aerial battles as a martial artist. It was still far too advanced a skill for Lynokis, though, no matter how hard she tried. *You have a long way to go. Work hard, my student.*

“More importantly, I found something interesting. Let’s go see it together.”

“What exactly did you find?”

“You’ll see when we get there.” Because I didn’t know what was beyond the illusion. There was no way for me to explain it. “Breathe in. Stop. Hold that breath. Are you good? Then let’s go.”

I took Lynokis’s hand, then kicked the water as I dived back under. I could sense Lynokis’s hesitation from her grip on my hand. Was it because of how fast I was going? But by the time we arrived at the rock wall, she appeared to have gotten used to it. I was still fine, but I made sure to rise to the surface so Lynokis could take another breath before we dived back under again.

I had no idea what was beyond the illusion. Was it a cave? How big was it? How deep did it go? Was there somewhere to come up for air? I had to be careful as we progressed, making sure I was keeping in mind the time it would take to return.

If worse comes to worst, I’ll just wreck the whole place and return to land.

I passed through the illusion while still holding Lynokis’s hand. The moment we did, I sensed a whole slew of new presences. It was as if we had appeared in

a whole new area. That illusion must have been a door between spaces.

What awaited on the other side was in fact a cave, but it was so narrow that an adult could barely stand. We stayed alert as we continued swimming through. Along the way, we discovered the massive fish I had been chasing hiding itself along a wall. It was so big that Lynokis startled when she saw it. From head to tail, it was bigger than her.

You can't even say it's camouflaging itself. Does it think it's actually hiding like that? Seeing it like this, it reminded me more of a catfish than anything else. Having learned its lesson earlier, it showed no reaction to us. I had lost interest in catching it as well, so we simply swam right past it.

There was a different, much larger presence that I could sense ahead of us that interested me much more.

The deep blue of the water was becoming lighter as we progressed. There was definitely something there, but Lynokis yanked on my hand, so I made the decision to return back for air first.

“What is that place? Are we going back down again? Can we not turn back?” she muttered after we made it to the surface, but I ignored her and dived back under again. When I’d asked if she wanted to stay here, she’d immediately said she would go, so what else was I to do?

We advanced through the cave again. Since we knew what to expect, we were able to swim much faster to get to where we’d left off. Before long, we were back in uncharted waters. And finally...

“Aha.”

At the end of the cave was a steep slope, and at the end of that was an open space above water. It seemed to be an actual corridor from where we surfaced.

Beautiful masonry walls, floor, and ceiling—unlike the cavern we had just swum through, this looked as if it had been touched by human hands. The walls appeared to be emitting some sort of light, since we could see where we were going perfectly fine without a lantern or torch. That would explain why it was bright, at least.

“Is this...a dungeon?” Lynokis muttered as she stared in wonder at the

unfamiliar place we had entered.

“Probably.”

I still didn’t know much about dungeons. If this was a dungeon, that meant this had naturally formed. The corridor *looked* man-made, but it in fact was not. Dungeons came in all different shapes and sizes, but the one thing that remained consistent was that they were never made by humans. No matter how artificial it looked, it was all entirely natural. Apparently, the leading theory was that dungeons were the world’s mana pathways. Monsters did tend to gather around areas with high concentrations of mana, so the logic was sound.

None of that was really important, though.

“They said there’s supposed to be a dungeon on this island, right?” I asked.

Lynokis nodded. “Yes. But I was told the general location of the entrance, and it definitely wasn’t underwater.”

“In other words, there’s *two* dungeons on this island?”

“Or maybe there are two entrances?”

I guessed we would figure out which it was if we continued down the path.

“Wait, Young Mistress, you can’t.”

“I just want to take a little peek, that’s all.”

“No, I’m being serious. You can’t. If this is in fact connected to a dungeon aboveground, messing around in here could completely disrupt the ecosystem.”

Tch... How dare she pull out a logical reason?

Dungeons were filled with monsters—in other words, they were filled with materials. Discovered dungeons tended to be regulated by an official body. They would draw a map of the dungeon, track who went in and out, make records of any monsters taken out during exploration, and generate statistics of the frequency of monster sightings. They would also observe the relationships between the different monsters. It was only after all of that that they could start actively farming monsters for materials—that was what I had learned in class.

In other words, since we had come to the dungeon from an unregistered entrance, if I was to satisfy my insatiable thirst for blood here by running rampant in the dungeon without permission, there was a possibility that all that data they had already recorded would go to waste.

This was a royalty-owned private island. It would be pretty bad if I were to make a noticeable mess of the place and trigger a search for the culprit. After all, it would mean that monsters died on one of the royal family's private islands outside the purview of the managing body. They would assume that there had been some intruder or that a new monster had appeared that preyed on the previous monsters. They would carry out a *very* thorough investigation in that scenario.

And then, I would almost certainly be caught. If I was caught, responsibility would fall on my parents. And so everything would then devolve into an absolute mess.

But still...

"There's no way I can just turn back after we came all this way. I came here ready to go wild."

"It really is not a good idea for you to do that."

"I know. But I want to go!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake. Stop acting like a child."

As much as I wanted to retort with "But I *am* a child!" Lynokis already knew that I was really a Valiant Spirit.

"You know what... Fine. We can take a peek."

"Really?!"

Who could have seen this coming? I had already half given up. I hadn't expected Lynokis to bend so easily.

"But you have to refrain from killing any monsters."

I knew that. It would only cause far too much hassle later.

"I'm sure you're strong enough that you can handle the monsters without

outright killing them, yes?”

Aha, now this was a very nice compromise.

“I’m good with that. Let’s hurry and clear this dungeon already!”

“What?! *Clear* it?!”

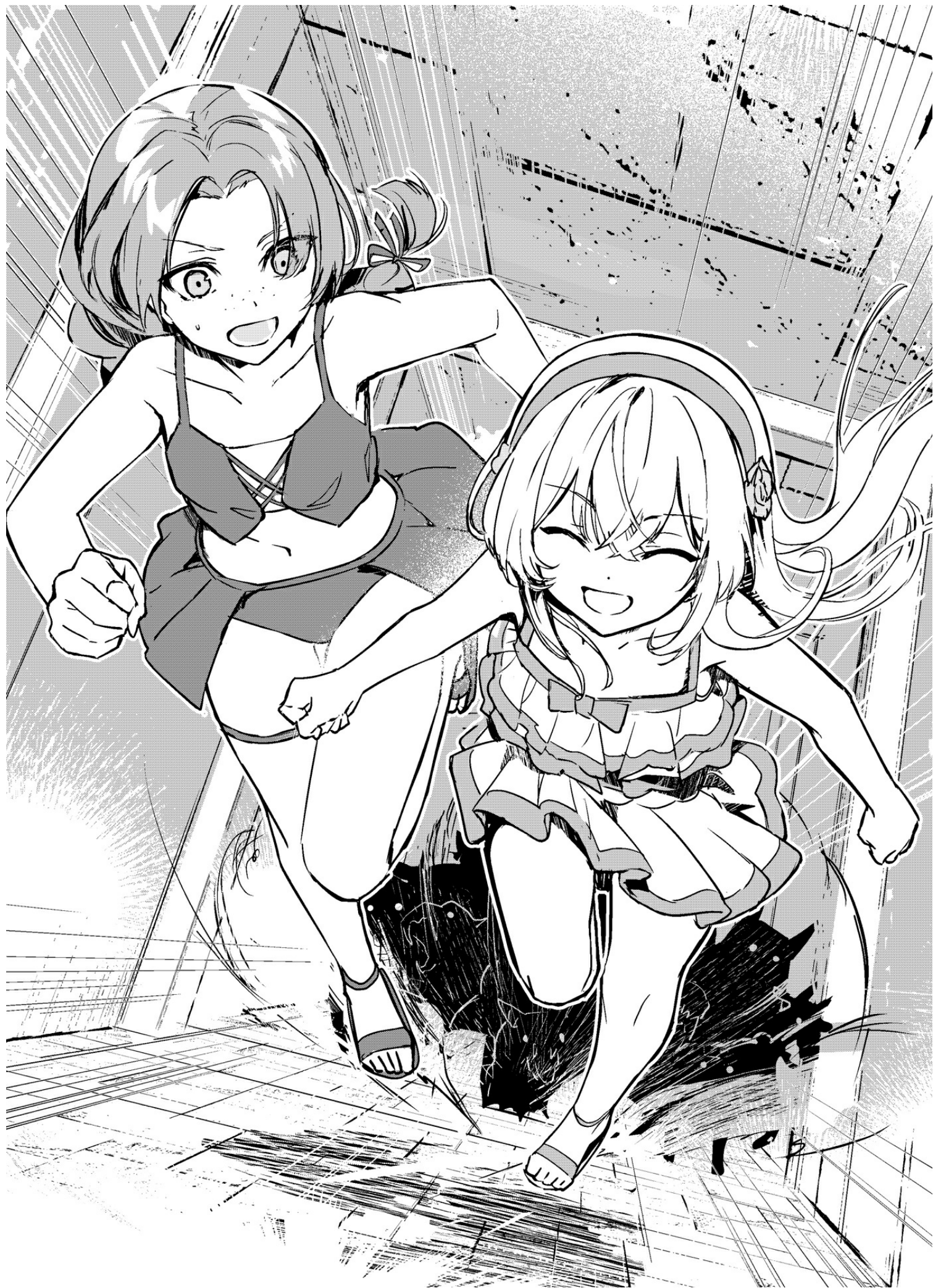
The island was small, so surely the dungeon was too. If we were fast about it, we’d make it to the end in no time.

A dungeon exploration consisting of just dashing through without stopping was surprisingly fun. You could basically call it a time trial, I supposed?

“Young Mistress! There’s something crazy going on behind us!”

“I know!”

We were being rushed by the sound of heavy footsteps behind us. Every monster we encountered, we ran from. We’d done that so many times by now that about twenty monsters were chasing after us at once. It would be fun to beat them all up, but running away from them like this was fun in its own way.



“Lynokis! There’s one at that corner!”

“Understood!”

When we turned the corner, we came face-to-face with a needlessly buff ox-head monster. It had been waiting to ambush us. The moment I entered its vision, it swung down its large club. The ground shook as it collided with a large thud into the earth. I had already evaded the strike and run right past the beast, though—Lynokis too.

“GUOAARGH!”

“Grrr! Growf!”

The two sets of monsters that had been after us ended up facing off against each other instead. The racket soon faded from our ears. Even if they stopped, we couldn’t.

“Oops.” When I put my foot down, it slightly sunk down into the ground—apparently I’d stepped in a trap. “Jump, Lynokis!”

“What? Whoa?!” I was able to simply speed up to avoid it. I passed the hole in the ground before it opened, while Lynokis had to jump to cross the sudden opening.

“Y-Young Mistress?! Why are you so fast?!”

“I’d call this slow, honestly!” It would be bad for me to leave Lynokis behind, so I made sure to maintain a distance at which I could still support her at any time. However, it did mean I could only go at a speed that matched her. *I could go even faster if I were by myself. Respect your master.*

And so, we kept running through the dungeon that was practically like a maze, sometimes stopping here and there to search the walls.

“Um... What are you doing exactly?”

“I’m expanding my chi to examine the terrain. I’m basically mapping our location.”

“You can even do that with chi? Is this energy all-powerful?”

The power was less in the chi itself and more in the practitioner.

“Chi manipulation is a technique that allows a human to enhance their natural abilities. We already come equipped with the senses to detect what is around us, allowing us to have an understanding of our surroundings. Strengthen that and you can do this anywhere. Human beings are actually talented little creatures; it’s just that our basic strength is fairly low,” I explained as I continued getting a sense of our location. “Seems there’s some stairs over that way. Let’s go.”

“Y-Yes, Young Mistress...”

When we made it to the sixth floor, we stopped on the stairs and took a short break. *I don’t think we’ve taken too much time.* We’d run into our fair share of monsters, but I’d kept my promise and left them untouched, dodging and running away from all who tried to attack.

“Small-scale dungeons tend to be about five to ten floors, right?” I asked.

“Usually. But there are a lot of exceptions when it comes to dungeons.”

Hmm, taking into account the time we’d need to take to go back, it was maybe worth giving up on clearing the dungeon. *Should probably turn back.* If we took too long, the staff at the villa would start to worry, and that might lead to them contacting my parents. I would lose a lot of my freedom if that were to happen. After all, it would mean an incident occurred in which a child almost went missing on an island belonging to royalty—and at a time when the king was present. There was no telling what effect something like that would have in the future, so I had to make sure I pulled back early. I had to avoid causing any unnecessary incidents.

I could’ve moved much faster if I had been by myself... I really needed to train Lynokis more. Nothing much to be done now, though.

“Let’s go down one more floor and then head back.”

“Yes, Young Mistress. Still...we’re really going through this dungeon at quite the fast pace. Usually, one would go through it much slower than this.”

“Really?”

“Don’t forget I used to be in the Department of Adventuring. I naturally learned about dungeons too. It is an ironclad rule that adventurers should

carefully progress through the dungeon, as there is no telling what dangers may await. Rather than waiting until danger is in your face, you should detect danger early and then deal with it appropriately.”

“I see.”

“There are many dangers in dungeons, after all, from traps to monsters. At least...if you were a normal adventurer.”

“Normal,” she says.

“In that case, that has nothing to do with me.” I shrugged.

“You’re right. I still don’t want you going near danger, though.”

If I felt like it, I’d deal with it however I must.

Now then...

“Are you ready to get moving again?”

“Yes. Still...do you get anything for clearing the dungeon? Are you looking for something? Or are you trying to find something you can sell?”

The idea that I was searching for something was perhaps the most accurate one.

“Stronger monsters appear the farther down you go, right?”

“I see. I’m glad to see you’re the same Young Mistress as ever.”

I was a martial artist—it was my natural wish.

“Shall we get moving, then?”

Taking down the strongest monster before we headed back would be a nice way to round off this exploration.

“Oh?”

As we descended the dungeon, I extended my senses to search lower down and stumbled upon a strong presence. It was something much stronger than any of the monsters we had encountered so far.

“Does something feel off to you?” Lynokis asked, clearly feeling something unusual herself.

“It seems like it was worth getting our feet dirty to search in here, after all,” I mused. Since we’d entered through the water, we were both still in our swimsuits, and our feet were bare.

“Let’s run if it seems really dangerous, okay?”

“Of course.”

Even Lynokis didn’t want to turn back now that we were this far. She had graduated from the Department of Adventuring, so even she likely enjoyed this kind of thing, despite her complaints.

Heh heh heh, let’s keep moving, shall we! I was getting excited. The presence below us felt quite ominous. Was it an undead? Or a demon? Maybe a wicked dragon? Or, no, what if it was a death god?! *Come on now, it’s a little too soon for a god, surely! I wouldn’t be able to win even with my full strength! That would be totally fine by me, though!*

Martial artists truly bloomed on the battlefield, especially a deadly one. Practical experience was an irreplaceable part of training; one became stronger the more they fought. And a warrior’s skill was honed in mortal combat. Including my previous life, I hadn’t had such practical experience for a while...I thought. I had become so strong that no one could ever match me...I thought. This presence I sensed made me so unbelievably excited I was ready to burst.

And so we arrived at the source of that sensation.

“Wh-What on earth is this...? Young Mistress, you can’t fight this one!” Lynokis’s face was pale as she looked upon the beast in fear.

But I could only let out a deep sigh of disappointment.

I hadn’t even asked for anything unreasonable. Just a lesser god or even a demigod would have been perfectly fine!

Actually, maybe that *was* a little unreasonable.

Some gaudy, semitransparent sludge was packed into every corner of the corridor in front of us.

“This is definitely a type of slime,” I said. “From the look of it, it’s already had quite the meal.”

I could already feel resentment growing in me for this simple slime, but this was a staple monster. Given how big this one had gotten, it had undoubtedly consumed countless other monsters already. Several bones were lodged inside its translucent red body; I could even see a massive skull. The slime had enveloped whatever living creatures it stumbled upon, dissolved them, and grown bigger as it absorbed the creatures into part of itself.

“Young Mistress, let’s turn back. We don’t even have any weapons on us.”

A slime’s biggest weakness was fire, but not only had we come empty-handed, we were also stuck in our swimsuits.

“Good idea.”

If it had at least been some sturdy foe that I could give a few hard punches with no worry, I would have been happy. There was nothing fun about punching a slime.

Ugh, we came all this way and for what? If I knew this would happen, I would’ve beaten up one of those ox-head monsters instead. In fact, I should do that on the way back.

“Oh no.”

I turned back to Lynokis when she spoke up again.

“Y-Young Mistress, above us...”

Above? *Oh... I see.*

I hadn’t realized because of its transparency, but it turned out the slime had been stretching itself down from the ceiling while we hadn’t been looking and had spread itself out behind us. Our way out was already blocked off, the slime slowly crawling towards us from both sides. Ordinarily, you could consider us dead meat by this point.

But this situation wasn’t that bad at all.

“Lynokis, let’s go.”

“Y-Yes, Young Mistress. I’ll create an opening, so follow behind me.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Well, we need to escape, so...”

“I understand that, but why are you standing in front of me?”

“Because I will create an opening, like I said! Stop acting ignorant in such a dire situation!”

What was she...? Oh, of course.

“Don’t tell me you were intending to sacrifice yourself to let me escape?”

A slime like this could effortlessly melt a human’s body, so Lynokis was going to create an opening ahead of me so that I could escape. Why though?

“Haven’t I told you about external chi?”

“External... Oh, of course!”

External chi was expelled from inside the user’s body—as in, you could use it to attack something without touching it directly. You could defeat an enemy without ever laying a hand on them.

“Chi is a very elaborate field of study. It can dramatically enhance the hidden capabilities of the human body. You can do some crazy things with just a bit of imagination and ingenuity.”

Without hesitation, I stretched out my hand and right before I touched the slime blocking our path, there was a bang, almost like a balloon popping, and the slime scattered. Slimes were like bodies of water, so I hadn’t managed to deal any damage to it, but it was enough of a window for us to escape.

“Make sure you don’t accidentally step on it,” I warned. We were barefoot after all. Stand on even just a small offshoot and we’d burn our skin right off.

Hang on...

“Lynokis, what do you think those are?”

I pointed to the acidic, gelatinous body of the slime that was slowly crawling back along the ground—it wasn’t the type of monster that could be defeated with a simple punch or a kick. Well, no trained martial artist would be caught without an appropriate countermeasure for a foe they were weak against. Under ordinary circumstances, I would blow this thing to pieces with a Raging

Fire Fist, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"Hm? Are those...eggs?"

That was what I thought. "It definitely looks like some sort of egg to you, right?"

There were little black specks about the size of a fingertip dotted around the gelatinous fluid. They were grouped together in clusters of two or three. If the regenerating part of the slime's body had been as intensely red as its main body, there would've been no way to see the eggs without staring intently at the slime. It was only because the smaller pieces were lighter in color that the eggs stood out—I wouldn't have noticed them otherwise. In fact, the only reason I paid attention to it *now* was because those little specks were moving inside the gel.

"What can live inside of a slime?" I asked.

It was upon staring closely at the slime's main body as it slowly closed the gap between us that I realized there were tons of those exact same eggs inside it too. There were enough of them that I didn't even bother counting.

"Young Mistress, these must be yao frog eggs."

"Yao frogs?"

"Or at least a subspecies of it. The way they lay their eggs and the shape are the same."

Trust a graduate of the Department of Adventuring to be so knowledgeable about these sorts of things.

"They're small monsters, but they are highly poisonous. If I recall correctly, they lay their eggs near contaminated water so that they are born with that poison in their systems. I'd never heard of any that could withstand a slime's corrosive acid, though. They're known for being very adaptable, so it's not surprising, at least."

"Should we not deal with them, then?" If they were safe within the acidic body of a slime, that meant they had acid resistance or a similar type of acidic characteristic. I wasn't entirely sure what kind of monster would be born, but if

this many deadly monsters were to hatch at once...would that not potentially have an effect on a dungeon's ecosystem?

"You raise a good point... Yao frogs create a sustainable environment for themselves by releasing a poisonous fog. If that fog were to be released in what is basically one massive closed room..."

"Then the entire dungeon would be contaminated." There was no flow of air within the dungeon; if poison was emitted in a space like this, it would simply remain. Eventually, it would fill the whole dungeon and inevitably leak to the outside. That or it would contaminate the lake from where we had entered. Such a beautiful lake being contaminated with poison? I'd never let that happen.

Lynokis nodded thoughtfully. "The eggs showing signs of movement means they are very close to hatching. Usually, we should contact the dungeonkeeper and let them handle it, but..."

We don't have that kind of time.

"So you're saying I can deal with them, yes?"

"I guess...we have little choice," Lynokis reluctantly admitted. "I imagine this will not fix the root of the problem, but if we can deal with these eggs now, that would be for the best."

Awwwww yeah! Permission to kill granted!

By "the root of the problem," Lynokis was likely referring to the fact that there must have been a mother who laid these eggs in the first place. I wouldn't go so far as to seek her out, but I could at least deal with the eggs that were in front of me.

"Ah, but please leave the slime alive. I'm fairly certain this is what blocks off many of the monsters from this lower level. If it disappears, the monsters' movement patterns will change."

Easy-peasy.

"Quick little thing first."

"Yes?"

“What way would you like me to deal with them? I’d prefer to get rid of them in the way that you would like to see, Lynokis.”

“You...look awfully happy, Young Mistress...”

But of course! Rarely was I granted the opportunity to use my true power.

We settled a short distance away from the slime and waited until the scattered pieces of its body joined together into one. I asked Lynokis what her request was while we stood there, and she said, “I’d like to see a kicking Technique.”

“You’d like to see me use some kind of kick, would you?”

It made sense—Lynokis was better at kicks than she was punches. Perhaps kicks came to her more easily. Understanding one’s natural preferences was always important since quite often they were tied to one awakening to their true talents.

“It’s harder to control the power behind a kick. To oversimplify it, hands are light and easy to manipulate, but legs are heavy and difficult to manipulate. You find it much easier to precisely control your hands and arms compared to your legs, right?”

“Ah, yes.”

Your hands existed to handle tools, while your legs existed to support your body. The muscle mass, the way the muscles were used, and even the quality of muscles were entirely different. It was incredibly difficult to use your arms and your legs in the same ways.

“In other words, there are no kicking Techniques I can actually teach you right now. The fact they’re difficult to use means that it takes that much more work to master them. It’s still too early for you.” She wasn’t even ready for Rumbling Thunder. Teaching her a Technique far beyond that would be impossible. It was a waste of time to put someone through training at a level they couldn’t even handle the basics of.

At my level, though, you could at least do modifications.

“That’s why I’ll show you how to do Rumbling Thunder, but with your legs.”

“What?! You can do that with a kick?!”

What a satisfyingly shocked reaction. *Yes, be amazed, my student! Revere your master!*

“Isn’t the step forward one of the most important parts of that Technique, though?!”

Exactly. The step forward is the core of the move, in fact.

“How are you supposed to step forward and kick at the same time?!”

Yes! Question the method.

“That is why you need to truly understand the Technique and perfect it. It is through understanding that you can adjust the skill.”

The trick was you simply took the function of that step forward and applied it to a different movement instead. Being able to make an arrangement like this on the fly, purely by instinct, without ever having done it before, meant that you had approached true understanding of the Technique.

Chi Fist: Rumbling Thunder was the most basic of the basic Techniques that utilized chi. It was for that exact reason that it was a Technique that I had used thousands, tens of thousands, even *millions* of times before. It was the Technique that I had polished most within my arsenal.

Not that a Technique could be truly perfected, of course. That was why we continued to evolve.

“I won’t teach you the logic behind it. Simply remember that you can do this kind of thing too.”

Fluidly step forward, raise your right leg...

And kick.

A large bang ripped through the corridor together with a shock wave that moved faster than the speed of light, making the slime disappear in an instant. It had exploded and scattered everywhere. I gave it a slightly stronger kick to make sure the frog eggs would be crushed along with it. The slime would return

to normal, no doubt, but anything inside it would have been blasted to smithereens.

Only the slime's manastone—its magical core—remained unscathed. It was truly some high-level technology.

"H-How?! How did you manage something like that?!"

Step strong, and let the strength from that momentum flow into your fist. This was Lynokis's understanding of Rumbling Thunder, which was fundamentally different from the kick I'd just demonstrated. At least, she *thought* it was. That would explain her complete shock.

But you're wrong, Lynokis. The fundamental idea behind it is the same. Nothing about it has changed. All I'd done was make adjustments to account for the fact the leg was more difficult to use than the fist. That was all.

"Finally respect your master?" I asked. I had never felt any true respect from Lynokis. It honestly felt like she was underestimating me a lot of the time. But come on, surely this had to be something that would make me worth respect in her eyes. Teachers can't reach happiness if their students don't respect them. I really wanted her to understand that already. As soon as possible. For the sake of my own peace of mind.

But I couldn't force her.

Whether from a slight motherly nature or just the will of a master, I wanted her to look at her teacher's back and understand how I was feeling without being told; having understood, I wanted her to then start respecting me. If I were to say it to her directly, it would sound far too desperate, not graceful in the slightest. It wasn't a pretty sight. Also, the more you brought it up, the more respect you'd lose. It was quite ironic, really.

Masters wanted to be able to tell a story with our bodies. We wanted our students to understand the things we were trying to say without us having to say them.

"That doesn't matter! Tell me the principles behind it! Tell me how you did it!"

She... She really just told me it doesn't matter! Does she not care about

respect? Does she not care about what I'm trying to tell her? Well, it seemed it would take a while yet before I earned her respect.

Fine.

"Shall we go home?" If I asked for it too often, I'd be making a mockery of myself, so I would simply give up.

I sighed...

No, seriously, why did she not respect me? It was so strange! I couldn't stop thinking about it. I had a feeling about ninety percent of people who knew me in my past life—student or not—had respected me, so why didn't Lynokis? Was she put off because I was too strong? Was this another situation where being too strong was a curse? I didn't care if other people didn't respect me, but I at least wanted my student to.

No, no, I won't think about this anymore. Wasting my time thinking about such vain things wouldn't change the situation, and if we didn't hurry up and get back, people would start getting worried.

But I could make our journey back a little violent! Just to let off some steam!

"Young Mistress, wait! Stop hitting them!"

I completely ignored Lynokis's voice from behind me. It wasn't as if I was killing them, only beating them up, just as I had promised. What was the problem? *Forgive me, I need to let off steam from how disappointed that slime made me.* And for how little she respected me.

Just be quiet and watch your teacher's back closely, I thought to myself, slapping the ox-head in my path, the sound of flesh hitting flesh resounding as it went catapulting away. After landing on its butt, it simply sat there on the ground of the corridor, holding down its swollen cheek as it looked at me with fearful eyes. They were the cute, round, innocent eyes of a victim. *Don't act like the victim here; you're the one who attacked me first.*

I continued to run, ignoring the ox-head's pleading face. I kicked away the big bad wolf, flicked away the large hares who were still stuck deciding if they should flee or fight, and knocked down the long-legged bird that was trying to

make its escape. I single-mindedly ran back down where we had come, as if I was playing a game of chase with the frantic monsters.

Of course, I wasn't actually chasing them—they just happened to get caught running in front of me. I *did* leave the ones running at the sides alone, after all.

It was more fun than I'd thought. I should've done this on our way here instead of having them chase us the whole way... Wait, but then there would've been no monsters on the way back. They were barely any match for me, but at least I did feel like I'd gotten out some anger.

We escaped the dungeon in a hurry and swam back through the lake. By the time we returned, people had already started to panic, wondering where we had gone, but we came back before the barbecue finished, so it didn't cause too much fuss. We were lucky that the king had drunk himself to sleep—if *he'd* gotten worked up, it would've been the worst. Thankfully, I got away scot-free...with just a bit of a scolding from Hildetaura.

What a shame.

"All of that ended up being for nothing," I sighed once Hildetaura's lecture had ended. We had made it all the way to the dungeon, and yet we had nothing to show for it. The most exciting moments were probably discovering the illusion of the stone wall and then finding the entrance to the dungeon after swimming farther in.

I would've been more satisfied if the monsters we'd encountered had actually been worth beating up. That had been the main course for me, after all. I'd at least gotten the chance to get in some real combat experience again, so it wasn't terrible, at least. Learning that my student was definitely underestimating me certainly hindered my enjoyment of finally being able to let loose.

"But you enjoyed yourself, didn't you, Young Mistress?"

Well... Yeah. Sorta.

I nodded at Lynokis's words. "It was fun enough."

We'd run out at the speed of light, but I had been able to enter a battlefield. It

was for only a moment—and it was quite the frantic moment—but we’d managed to go far enough that we’d entered an area brimming with hostility.

It wasn’t a bad time.

“Keep what happened in the dungeon a secret, okay?” Lynokis whispered in my ear. “I will tell them that we found the entrance and nothing more.”

I nodded in understanding. In other words, she wanted me to go with the story that we’d found the entrance but had never gone inside. Probably because it would be a real pain if they started interrogating us about what we’d done, what we’d seen, if we’d messed the place up, or whatever.

Were there actually two dungeons or were there just two entrances? I wasn’t sure if I’d ever get to learn the answer to that. At least it was some nice light exercise after lunch.

After that, I played in the water with Hildetaura and Reliared as promised. Well, to me it was more like watching over my grandchildren—accidents could easily happen by bodies of water, after all.

Yes, yes, I’m watching, so you can go play. Don’t go too deep now.

Yes, yes, play with the ball as much as you like. In fact, play until you’ve completely exhausted yourselves.

Yes.

Oh, I see. You’re aiming for me, aren’t you, Hildetaura? You keep throwing that ball at me over and over. Perfect. I’ll show you what it’s like to play.

“Whoa! Hang on! Don’t throw it so hard, Nia!”

“Don’t worry. I’m holding back.”

“You say that, but you do not actually mean it, yes? That is the kind of person you are, after all.”

No, I was being serious. What kind of brute did Hildetaura think I was? Actually, what kind of brute did *both* of them think I was?

Lynokis and I ended our vacation on the island a day early and returned to the

capital ahead of Hildetaura, Reliared, and the king. Yesterday's barbecue ended up being my favorite memory of that trip, I thought. As in, the sight of the king getting drunk while he grilled the meat and went absolutely wild was the only thing that had been truly burned into my mind... It was because of him that my vacation was so indescribable. At least I'd gotten in some training and deep meditation. I'd even gotten to go to a dungeon.

And yet, somehow, the thing that remained in my mind most was probably the king.

Well, whatever. I couldn't stay in a vacation mood forever. It was about time I got serious. My second semester at school would be starting soon. There were some things I wanted to prepare beforehand, so I chose to return a day early.

After having a good talk with Lynokis, we had come to the decision that when I returned to school, she would begin her life as an adventurer. She'd already graduated from Altoire's Department of Adventuring, so she had the basic know-how she needed to get started. She was surprisingly perfect for this job.

"You can use the bar as a base if you want, but I've wiped my hands of the underworld, all right? Keep the trouble outta here."

The first place we went was Anzel's bar, the Shifty Shadow Rat. If Lynokis were caught doing work as an adventurer and people learned that she was also my attendant, it would no doubt cause conflict in her work for the Listons. As such, we decided she should work under both a disguise and a fake name—and that one of her bases of operations would be this bar. We'd managed to get Anzel's permission, so we didn't hesitate to use it.

My little venture out to the Umbral Arena had also turned out to be worth it, since Lynokis and Anzel had become acquainted.

"Still, one billion krams? Bit of a tall order, no?"

"Right? Lily might be small, but her ambitions are so big."

We'd made sure to at least tell Anzel and Fressa why Lynokis was taking work as an adventurer: we had a reason we needed to raise a billion krams. Using a fake identity while being an adventurer was already pretty suspicious at a glance, so we thought it best to tell them so we could avoid any pesky

misunderstandings that could cause us trouble later.

In terms of telling them *why* we wanted the money, it wasn't set in stone the tournament would even be going to production, so I decided not to tell them. That was where the money would be going, but if we didn't raise those billion krams to begin with, there wouldn't be a tournament to see.

"You can help out if you want," I suggested as I drank the juice that Anzel had served to me. "You'd basically get nothing in return, though."

Anzel huffed, while Fressa gave a cold, polite smile.

"Yeah, no thanks. I refuse to work for free. Goes against my policy."

"Same here. I'm not struggling for money, but I don't have such leeway either."

Really? What a shame.

"Either way, Lynokis will be operating on her own volition. If she thinks she needs assistance, she can decide to recruit you—and how much she'd be willing to pay you."

From their responses, they would be willing to help for coin. There would probably be commissions in the future where Lynokis would appreciate the help, so she should do whatever worked for her.

"I'll likely join in too here and there. I look forward to working with you then," I said.

With this, we at least didn't have to worry about a base for Lynokis's adventuring life. She would never have any trouble with the rough back alleys.

Next, I headed for the company that Hildetaura had kindly written a letter of introduction to. It was a large establishment, well-known to aristocrats. The princess had assured me that I could trust them on the information, cash, and activities front.

They were called Cedony Trading.

Even I had at least heard their name before; they had a branch in the Liston territories. Apparently, they were one of the biggest trade associations in the

Kingdom of Altoire. Their sheer size meant that they had built up both trust and reputation across many of the islands.

“Welcome, Miss Nia Liston.”

It was my first time at the flagship store in the capital, but the young employee still knew who I was. The bigger the association, the more information floated their way, and they had likely bought into the magivision industry in some fashion, as well.

“I’d like to meet your manager. This is my letter of introduction.”

“Thank you very much. Please wait here a moment.”

The moment they took the letter, the employee disappeared into the back of the shop, then almost immediately returned.

“This way, please.”

And then Lynokis and I were immediately let through to the meeting room. Having a letter from royalty really did make things quick.

With all that running around the capital, the few remaining days of my summer vacation were over in a flash. The new school semester would now begin.

Could I even consider that a real vacation? For most of it, all I’d done was work.

“Please do look after yourself, Young Mistress,” Lynokis said as I saw her off from the dorm.

“And you, Lynokis,” I said back to her.

I would now head to class. Frankly, there was nothing for me to be careful about, but Lynokis’s case was different. She would be leaving the academy and making her debut as an adventurer. She had chosen her target and had already made her preparations for the trip to the floating island where it roamed.

She planned to be gone for three to six days. In other words, I wouldn’t be seeing Lynokis for a little while.

She had yet to truly learn Rumbling Thunder, but the incomplete ones she fired still had enough power to them that she would be able to handle the mark she had chosen without issue.

Her first target was a stoneshell tortoise. They were known for their toughness, but would still be no hassle for her. Even if their outer shells were tough, living creatures had very weak insides. The stronger their shells were, the more they were trying to protect what was underneath. A strong enough impact that traveled through to the inner parts of their body could very easily kill them.

This first journey was also a test to see just how much she could make and at what rate, so this was an especially important test case. This first adventure would serve as the benchmark and guideline for our future financial plans.

Two years, one billion krams—There was no other choice. There was no room for hesitation. We simply had to do this.

And that was how my second semester as a first-year at elementary school began.

Chapter 5: An Adventuring Debut

I'd thought I had prepared for everything before executing our plan, but it turned out someone I hadn't accounted for began making her own moves the moment Lynokis was absent.

To be blunt: I had completely miscalculated.

"Young Mistress Nia, may I also ask for training under your tutelage?"

When classes had finished and I returned to the dorms, I found her there waiting for me—Neal's personal attendant, Lynette.

I had asked if she could carry out Lynokis's housework in her absence, and now she was suddenly asking if I could train her. According to Lynokis, the two of them had been classmates in the Department of Adventuring back in their middle school years, and they'd even sometimes been in the same party. They had both been hired by the Liston family two years ago, but due to the nature of their work, the two rarely got to talk to or even see each other.

They had begun hanging out together once I'd started school and begun living in the dorms; the two would often meet up while my brother and I were in class. I imagined they had their own little tea parties. Apparently, they had also ended up befriending Reliared's attendant, Esuella.

Back when they had first met, I would've sworn that Lynokis and Esuella didn't like each other much... But I supposed when you lived in the same place and bumped into each other often enough, your relationship with someone could very easily change. An information network of personal attendants had apparently been forming right under my nose.

"Training? What kind?"

"I've been keeping my eye on you ever since I first saw you almost completely split the wooden sword I held back at the estate."

That was the move I'd shown my brother when I'd interrupted his swordsmanship training, back when I was still in a wheelchair. Lynokis had

really loved that move too—so much so she had asked me to show it to her over and over again.

“You certainly have a good memory to bring up something from so long ago.” I was very healthy now, but at the time, I had been so weak that all my focus was on healing my own body, so I had little memory of what had been going on around me. Each day had taken all of my effort, after all. “I don’t mind,” I continued. “But do *you* have the time?”

Lynette also had to look out for my brother. If she was still able to ensure the future lord of the Liston family’s safety, then of course I would welcome her getting stronger. But time was undoubtedly a problem.

Lynokis was assigned to me, so it had been easy enough to work out a schedule for her; there were times I even adjusted my own schedule to align with hers. Lynette was different, though—she was assigned to someone else entirely.

“Young Master Neal always returns home late and is always rather early to bed. I’m sure I can make a little bit of time in the evenings after that.”

Just a little, hm?

“Also, Lynokis made a few requests of me, so training with you makes things more convenient for me in that sense, as well.”

“‘A few requests’?” I repeated, my brow furrowed.

“Yes. She asked me to ensure that you are properly finishing your homework.”

...

“I was also told to make sure you are not watching any harmful programs on magivision, so I will be confiscating your MagiPad during the night.”

...

“I will train while you do your homework. How does that sound?”

...

Lynokis, you little...! You knew I was secretly looking forward to being alone,

didn't you?!

Oh well. If the student was doing her all for her master, then the master should do their best as well. I would at least abide by the rules and my promises to her: I wouldn't leave the school grounds, I would do all my homework, I would do any class prep and revision on time, I would go for a bath every day, I wouldn't stay up late, I wouldn't watch any restricted programs, and I would make sure to at least tie up my hair if combing it every morning was too much of a hassle.

And finally, if I ever needed any help, I would go to Esuella for assistance, as Lynokis had already asked for her help on the matter. Since Lynette was my brother's attendant, she stayed in the boys' aristocrat dorm, which meant there was still a bit of a distance. If I needed help in the middle of the night, she was too far away to easily call.

Thinking back, I had really made quite a number of promises. I'd been rather dismissive in my responses to her about it, but she'd been so insistent, I'd apparently memorized them at some point.

I understand. I'll not break any of those promises, Lynokis.

"That's fine. My surveillance is included in this, yes? Stay by my side as much as possible, then." I already had a record of sneaking out at night to go to the Umbral Arena, so Lynokis was most likely both worried and suspicious of what I would get up to while she was away. Lynette could watch over me all she liked so long as it didn't interfere with her responsibility to Neal.

Plus, I'd actually remembered something that would be worth bringing up to her.

"Lynette, I need to confirm something with you. You are my brother's attendant, and you are therefore an ally of the Liston family, yes?"

"Of course."

"Now, hypothetically speaking—I repeat, *hypothetically* speaking—if my brother were to ask you to give him one billion krams, what would you do?"

"Whether possible or not, I would give him all that I owned."

And she passed with flying colors. The way she showed absolutely no hesitation in her response gave me that same sense of unease around her I had around Lynokis. I could feel a blind devotion for Neal from the way that she neither asked questions nor voiced any doubts, from the way her eyes did not wander and her expression never changed and her emotions never flickered even the tiniest amount.

In which case, I could trust her.

With how our relationship would be developing from here, she might end up realizing that I was a Valiant Spirit, but I had now confirmed that that outcome would be fine. So long as nothing happened to Neal as a consequence of this, she would likely not care.

Now that I'd come this far, I might as well train everyone around me into people that could help me raise that one billion krams. I would take all the help I could get—why refuse? This need for a billion krams was greatly tied to the Listons' financial troubles. We absolutely had to find a way to get through this. I was sure my people would turn a blind eye to something as minor as this.

With that decided, I came to the conclusion I might as well get Gandolph involved—he was the first I had considered, after all. My dorm room was awfully small, so I could take that opportunity to ask if I could make use of the Heavenstriker dojo as well.

“But of course! I would be honored beyond belief were you to use each and every corner of our lowly dojo, Master!”

The next day after school, Lynette joined me in visiting the Heavenstriker dojo to ask Gandolph if we could use the space to train. When we did, he agreed without even a moment of hesitation. In fact, he practically offered himself up as well.

“Listen up, everyone! No training today, so head on home!”

“No, wait—”

Don't chase your students out like that! I just need it at night. You look after your children's progress for now.

Gandolph turned back to me as his students filed out. “Oh, and, um, while you’re here, really just while you’re here, if you perhaps maybe would consider it, could you please guide my training as well? I beg of you!”

“Gladly. I’ll teach you with real combat experience so that your strength will increase with ease.”

“Oh, what a benevolent soul!”

This body was so small—Gandolph would be perfect for carrying any of the monsters we defeated while hunting on the floating islands. If he got stronger while also primarily being our pack mule, we’d profit in proportion to his strength. Naturally, this wouldn’t be a bad deal for him either, if he thought of becoming stronger as his reward for carrying our spoils. Honestly, when you considered that he’d already built up a solid foundation, he could really be a reliable ally with a bit of training...

“Um, can I...help you?”

I ran my hands over Gandolph’s body to check. *Hmm... The thickness of his arms, the firmness of his thighs... He’s a big mass of muscles hard as rocks. I don’t think he’d have any hope of being swift, but this isn’t bad in and of itself.*

He would be weak against agile fighters like Lynokis, but even that could be dependent on how I trained him. Gandolph could actually turn into a monster himself. It wouldn’t hurt to have as many strong contestants as possible for the national tournament—in fact, the more there were, the more exciting the whole event would be. I did still want Lynokis to win, but without some rivals, it would be boring to watch, and it would decrease her motivation to train, as well.

Close matches in tournaments were always the most exciting. Deathmatches were the true spectacle of martial arts.

“I was just thinking you seem worth training,” I told him.

“I-I see! I am prepared to endure any and all hardship!”

Do your best.

With that, I gained trustworthy allies in both Gandolph—who really seemed two steps away from just abandoning the Heavenstriker style altogether—and Lynette. Ririmi and Sanowil Badr—who had endlessly been asking for me to observe his training even after summer vacation—also seemed like people I could rope into this whole project, but for now, I would continue to observe. I was a little more reluctant to ask school students to help with something like this.

That said, there was still room for doubt. The more people I had earning money for me, the more attainable earning one billion krams felt. Right now, Lynokis was doing what only she could do, so I had to also find what only I could do and carry it out.

In other words, I would train strong martial artists following Lynokis with my own hands, so they could raise money in place of me—so I could have them pay tribute to me.

“Now then...”

After leaving the school grounds, Lynokis headed to the apartment that would serve as her base from here on. It was a small place arranged by Cedony Trading in a somewhat rough residential district far off of the main street. As Altoire ostensibly had no slums, it was a rather normal place to live with cheap living costs. For an adventurer just starting out, it could almost be called a luxury.

She’d had the basic tools that she would need in her life as an adventurer sent to the apartment in advance: a sword, a knife, leather armor, rope, a lantern, and other small essentials, along with a few changes of clothes. The apartment came furnished, but she doubted she would have many opportunities to use its amenities.

The place was so minimalist that it would be impossible to tell her tastes from just looking at her living space. It was an adventurer’s room, but there was no way to tell what kind of adventurer it was—there was only a vague sense that someone even lived there.

This was where Lynokis’s two years as an adventurer would begin, all this time after she graduated from the Department of Adventuring.

I never imagined this would be why I became an adventurer, she mused to herself, as she began a spot check of her gear.

“Lynokis, are you here?”

Soon after, the guest she had been expecting arrived. “Come in!” she called out, following the knock. Standing in her doorway was the popular new actress on the scene, Sharro White. She had arrived wearing her street clothes, looking like an ordinary girl without the embellishments of costume and stage makeup. Her actress aura was completely nonexistent.

“I’m sorry for calling you out all this way, Sharro. Please come in.”

“Ah, yeah, no problem. You know...it’s quite refreshing seeing you in regular clothes for a change.”

Up until now, Sharro had only seen Lynokis when she was attending to Nia, and she’d therefore always been in her servant attire. The two had been around each other several times up until now, but this was the first time Lynokis had ever shown her private self to the girl. Her attendant aura was completely nonexistent.

“So you really did move here, huh?” Sharro asked with a glance around the place.

Lynokis’s reunion with Sharro had been a complete coincidence. It turned out that Sharro lived in the same apartment block that had been arranged for her. The two had bumped into each other as Lynokis had been moving her things into her unit. Both had been shocked at the other’s presence.

“This is just a side job, right?” Sharro’d asked when they bumped into each other.

“Yes. I have a goal that requires a lot of money, you see.”

Lynokis had explained the situation to Sharro; Sharro knew that Lynokis had been rooming with Nia at the school dorms, after all. Though Lynokis had hesitated at first, she’d realized soon after that that was unnecessary, and so she’d explained the reason she was there.

“I suddenly have a need for money, so I’ve begun a side job as an adventurer

to begin raising more. Nia is also aware of this.” Upon her explanation, Sharro had been satisfied. There was no problem in explaining the situation—Nia really had given permission, after all.

She wouldn’t lie that she was a little afraid the main Liston house would find out, but...Nia’s orders were her priority. This mission of hers was also for the sake of the Liston family, so Lynokis had no qualms about taking it on. Nia’s reason for wanting a billion krams was related to the promotion of magivision, and that meant it was for the benefit of all the Listons.

There were parts of the story that she was hiding, but what she had said was one-hundred-percent the truth, so she didn’t see any issue with her comment. She just had to keep the reason for the money quiet.

More importantly...

“I made what preparations I could with the money you gave me, but keep in mind these here aren’t the best. They’ll wear off easy from sweat or rain, so make sure you just use these for practice,” Sharro said, approaching the table in Lynokis’s apartment.

“I see.”

“There are some products out there that have been combined with potions. They’re powerful enough they won’t wear off without something to dispel the magic, but they’re expensive. They tend to only be used by aristocrats.”

Depending on the situation, I may have to make use of those too, Lynokis thought to herself.

“Shall we get started, then?”

Sharro swiftly laid out a bunch of makeup tools on the table. From here on out, Lynokis would be working not as an attendant of the Liston family of the fourth class but as a sprightly new adventurer. It was important that she act as someone else entirely to avoid causing issues in either of her jobs—and that meant she needed a disguise.

Clothes were easy enough to acquire, but she wanted to learn how to use makeup to disguise herself as well. It was while she had been thinking about that that she had had her fateful reunion with the stage actress. Her reason for

explaining the situation to Sharro had also partly been so she could learn some of her tricks of the trade. It wasn't that Lynokis couldn't use makeup, but she only knew the basics, nothing fancy. She wouldn't say she was all that good at it.

And that was why she had arranged to meet with Sharro again today: she would be taught how to use makeup.

"Are you ready to become a beautiful lady, Lynokis?" Sharro asked with a playful smile.

"Please don't feel the need to do anything elaborate. We don't have much time, so just some simple makeup that gives a different impression would be perfect." Lynokis wasn't out to become beautiful; she just wanted a good disguise.

"Huh? I fully intend to keep going until you become the best possible you," Sharro muttered with a smirk.



“Makeup is a woman’s weapon and her armor,” Sharro said, picking up a brush. “If you don’t put in all your effort, not only will it be entirely useless, it could end up detracting from you. You’ll end up being looked down on—you’d have been better off not putting on makeup at all. So if we’re going to do this, I’m definitely going to make you as beautiful as I can, and I’m gonna make sure you remember how to do it.”

Both the intensity of her gaze and the powerful voice projecting from her stomach made her seriousness more than apparent—Lynokis couldn’t help but feel intimidated.

Lynokis sighed.

The session had been much tougher than she’d expected. Not much time had passed, but she felt like she’d had the most thoroughly dense lesson ever.

First, Sharro had put Lynokis’s makeup on while explaining the steps. Lynokis could do simple makeup, but Sharro was meticulous: she was detailed, precise, and moreover, *fast*. She had been able to do it to that quality all while instructing. Under her hands, Lynokis had transformed into an entirely different person in an instant, her face brighter, and her impression entirely different.

“I-Is this really me...?!” she couldn’t help but wonder as she’d looked at her beauty in the mirror. Sharro had done exactly as she’d said she would.

Everything was fine up until that point. The problem was what came after.

This time, it had been Lynokis’s turn to put on the makeup. She couldn’t exactly call Sharro over every time she needed a disguise, so this whole visit would have been pointless if she didn’t learn how to do it herself. She wouldn’t even be able to fix up her makeup on the fly if she needed to.

She had to be able to recreate the image of a beautiful woman that only retained a slight glimpse of herself. And that had undoubtedly been difficult. She’d failed again and again, given it another shot again and again, until finally, she’d created a version of herself that Sharro approved of.

“The key is really just getting used to it. Once you do, you’ll be able to do it in a flash. Well, part of that is dependent on you, of course, but with me as your

teacher, there's no way you'll be anything but your best," she said. "Still, you downplay yourself way too much. You've always been pretty, so I was sure you'd look great in makeup, but you've surpassed my expectations."

So she says.

Lynokis didn't have any interest in romance right now, so she honestly didn't care about looking beautiful, but if this satisfied Sharro, then it was fine.

Honestly, she was already exhausted, but it was only lunchtime.

After spending the whole morning doing the makeup training, it was time for Lynokis to truly get to work. She was already a little tired, but she needed to go register at the adventurer's guild and immediately head out to start earning some money. She had made airship arrangements with Cedony and had already decided her destination.

As thanks for teaching her, Lynokis treated Sharro to lunch—"Wait, seriously? Sure, I'll take you up on the offer."—and while there, bought some hairpins that Sharro recommended. "If you're going to disguise yourself, you gotta do something with your hair too!" she had proclaimed—advice befitting a stage actress of a hundred faces.

After saying goodbye to Sharro, who had to go to her own part-time work, Lynokis returned to her apartment, then changed into her adventurer's gear.

"There we go." Thick leather armor with only the essentials, and a shortsword hanging from her waist—with such meager gear equipped, she was quite obviously a novice adventurer. "It's...kind of heavy."

Ever since becoming Nia's student, Lynokis had completely switched to hand-to-hand combat—the sword almost felt like a hindrance now, even though she had used one every day while still at school. *I can probably just remove it when I'm in the field.*

She swiftly finished getting ready, then took everything she had prepared for her days-long trip and headed off. Cutting through the main street, she entered a side street and headed for a large building with an old sign hanging outside.

This was the adventurer's guild.

It had been her dream since she was in middle school to be there. Lynokis had always wanted to become an adventurer; that was why she'd entered the Department of Adventuring after elementary school, after all. She'd been employed by the Liston family right after graduation. In need of enough money to support herself while living the adventurer life, she had applied for the position given how well paid it was and been hired on the spot.

Her job description included everything personal attendants were expected to do, as well as looking after a young, dying child. Her pay was proportionate to the long hours she was expected to work, and she had begun her job fully intending to make a clear split between her work and her personal life. But then a lot had happened, and here she was now.

She found she no longer had that desire to become an adventurer she'd had growing up. She had ended up thinking that being by Nia's side was more fun, that she would be content remaining in her position as the girl's attendant.

Honestly, just looking after Nia was often like going on an adventure sometimes. Thanks to Nia's work surrounding the unfamiliar technology of magivision, Lynokis had the opportunity to witness occupations she knew little about firsthand and meet new people and see new places she never would have ordinarily. The experiences were so exciting they were like their own mini adventures.

When all was said and done, Lynokis didn't really care where attending to Nia led her. What did Nia's future hold? How far would she go on her path? Lynokis was curious about what the young mistress would achieve, so she wanted to remain by her side and see it all through. If Nia asked her to become an adventurer, then she would become an adventurer. That was enough for her right now.

"Welcome."

When Lynokis casually pushed open the door, she was immediately greeted by one of the ladies at the reception desk.

She could only look around in silent wonder. The moment she entered, she saw four tables in the reception area—the adventurers sitting there turned to look at her upon her entry. No one moved, though, only watched.

Adventurer's guilds in the past had apparently been much more cutthroat, but nowadays, they were calmer and more cheerful spaces—especially the one in a place known to be as naively peaceful as Altoire. That said, there were stories of guilds in other countries that had become the meeting grounds for thugs who called themselves adventurers but picked a fight with anyone who would dare meet eyes with them.

Well, no matter which field you were in, there were those who were successful at the top and those who rotted at the bottom.

There were largely two kinds of adventurers: the hunters who, as the name implied, primarily hunted monsters; and the explorers who would go on expeditions to the uncharted floating islands. It was inefficient trying to be both at the same time, so it was normal for adventurers nowadays to choose one and stick with it as their main form of work.

"I'd like to register as an adventurer," Lynokis said, speaking to the receptionist. The lady looked in her thirties and was giving a bright, polite smile, but she emitted an aura that communicated that she should not be underestimated. No doubt she was a former adventurer, more than used to dealing with violent tasks.

"Yes, of course. If you could sign these forms here, please. Need some party members? We can introduce you to some nice people."

"No, I'll be fine. I'd rather work alone until I'm used to it," Lynokis answered as she filled in the papers she had been given.

"Hm... Yeah, you'll definitely be fine by yourself."

"Huh?" Lynokis turned her head up.

"You're strong," the receptionist said with a grin. That wasn't just a polite smile anymore. "You don't come across as a rookie, and you don't come across as a regular civ either. Where'd you come from? You from overseas?"

Do I really give that impression? Lynokis couldn't help but internally ask in confusion. Well, she *was* Nia's student, so she was fairly sure she'd become much stronger than before, at least. Her only real point of comparison up until now had been Nia herself, so it was hard to feel as if she'd made any progress at

all. Oh, and since her actual job was as an attendant to the daughter of the Liston family, she was most definitely a civilian.

“Is this fine?” Lynokis asked, holding the documents out as she ignored the receptionist’s curious probing.

“Don’t wanna talk? Eh, whatever. Let’s see... Miss Leeno, is it? Welcome to the adventurer’s guild, Leeno.”

After registering with her fake name, Lynokis was given a rehearsed spiel of warnings, and after paying the registration fee, she finally received her Adventurer’s Card.

Now Lynokis really was an adventurer. This was the day that Leeno—the adventurer whose name would be known all across the world—was born, without any fanfare.

She technically already had plans for the day figured out, but she decided to head to the bulletin board first, like a real adventurer.

The bulletin board was where requests and job ads would be posted—it was through taking these on that adventurers made themselves a living. Most of the postings were monster hunts or island explorations. More interesting requests included searching for missing pets, going on ghost hunts in the sewers, private investigations into specific people, bodyguard assignments, and going on test flights for prototype airships (with hazard pay). On the shady side, there were debt collection and clinical trials for potions.

Honestly, some of the requests caught her attention, but she already knew what her plans from here were; she’d likely never take any requests from the boards. Lynokis’s activities were purely to earn money, and if she wanted to make a ton of money in a short amount of time, there was no better option than hunting monsters for materials.

“Yo, rookie. What kinda work you lookin’ for?”

When Lynokis turned around, she was greeted by the sight of a slightly dirty man who was maybe around one or two years older than her. He looked a little...reckless, but he didn’t seem to have any evil intentions, so she wouldn’t ignore him. Had she been on personal time or working as Nia’s attendant, she

would've completely walked by him and left it at that, though...and perhaps dealt with him appropriately if his eyes had been on Nia.

Right now, though, she wasn't Lynokis—she was the adventurer Leeno.

"I've already decided what monster I want to go hunt. I was just curious to see the offerings."

"A monster hunt, huh? What's the target?"

"A tortoise."

Mention a tortoise in the presence of an Altoire adventurer, and they'd instantly think of a stoneshell tortoise.

"Know how to deal with them? They're not really made for rookies."

Stoneshell tortoises were known to be difficult to fight, being both sturdy and heavy. They weren't all that dangerous, but they were hardy creatures. Rookie adventurers who had no idea how to approach them would never stand a chance.

"How about you come with us instead and go hunt some beavers? It's almost time for the airship to depart."

"Sorry, but I'll pass. I already have plans."

It was impossible to make a living off of rock-eating beavers. They weren't worth very much money, and if Lynokis was working in a party, they'd have to split the profits. Plus, it would be annoying if her disguise was ruined when she was around other people.

"Ask me out on a different day and I'll consider it." Lynokis casually brushed him aside as she left the guild.

If she wanted to make her name known as an adventurer, she had to become acquainted with her colleagues. It would increase her sources of information, and it would prevent conflict down the line. She was still just starting out, though, so she was content at simply preventing any sort of fight with fellow adventurers.

"Hello. I'm the adventurer here on behalf of Miss Nia Liston."

Upon arriving at Cedony Trading's flagship store, Lynokis showed her receipt. That receipt was proof of the deal that Nia and the president of the company had made a few days prior, and served as a form of identification. Right now, her goal was to make her name reputable enough that she could get special treatment just with her identity.

"The preparations for the airship are complete, so please make your way to the port," the employee said, seeming already aware of the deal in place.

"Oh, you're the one I'm waitin' for, eh? Hop in."

When she arrived at the port, she found the captain of the ship having a smoke in front of his vessel and showed him the receipt as proof of her identity. After getting his approval, she boarded the small Cedony-branded airship.

Other than the captain, there were two crew members onboard. It was a small airship with very few rooms, so it was likely a cargo ship designed with mobility in mind. A larger ship would be much harder to maneuver and less fuel efficient, so something like this was perfect for them.

"Have you been given the rundown of the safety precautions and all that?" the captain asked after they were up in the air, moving away from the wheel—the airship would be going straight for a while, so there was no need for a helmsman at the moment.

"Roughly," Lynokis said.

"Hmm, in that case, let me give you a brief explanation. The charter fee for the ship and our payment is five hundred thousand krams. Each extra day you're on the island will cost you an extra one hundred thousand, so be careful. We'll wait ten days max, but if you aren't back by then, we'll leave without you. May seem like a steep price to someone just starting out, but comparatively, it's pretty cheap."

Lynokis nodded. She already knew—at market price, the payment would easily cross one million for even this bare-bones crew. New adventurers generally split the price with other party members or just used a regular liner. Only the best of the best could charter a ship for themselves or even own their own.

Should she see it as Cedony doing her a favor, or did she owe Nia a debt? Regardless, Lynokis would simply carry out her job.

They left just after noon and arrived as the sun was starting to set. Their destination was Metora Marsh Island. It was a wetlands island previously owned by the Metora family of the sixth class. Though these days, the Metora family was now only a name in history.

As the name implied, the ground of the island was always wet, and water sources were abundant. It was said that crops grown in the mud here were of good quality, but it didn't exactly serve as a suitable place for habitation.

"Right, well, just come back here whenever you're ready. We'll always be in the area, so any time you need a helpin' hand, just give us a holler. You're payin' us and all, so don't think you've gotta be considerate of us."

The island was also known as a popular fishing spot. The second they arrived, the captain and his crew busied themselves getting ready to do just that. Getting the impression the captain was wanting her to hurry along, Lynokis swiftly left the airship.

The only human settlement was near this small harbor. The poor drainage meant there weren't exactly many places that were suitable for building houses. In other words, this would be Lynokis's base of operations. She already knew her rough destination, so there'd be no need for her to camp out. She'd be able to come back here for rest when she needed.

"First off..."

She needed to find a place to stay. Then she'd ask some locals to confirm her map was accurate, get some information on the island, and finally head off.

Lynokis would be on the island for about three to five days. After running down a simple road made with nothing but planks of wood for a while, she arrived at the waterfront she was looking for. The ground on this island was said to be constantly muddy, so it was impossible to make a path by just leveling it.

"Let's give this a try, shall we?"

She removed the shortsword from where she kept it by her waist and hooked her bag on a nearby tree. After applying insect repellent cream—which was practically *required* if you were going to be exploring an island—she began taking a real look at her surroundings.

There was no need for her to look far; the monsters she was looking for were everywhere.

Fancy name aside, stoneshell tortoises were really just massive tortoises. They weren't aggressive nor were they swift. They would bite at you if you got too close to their faces, but the easy solution to that was to simply aim from the back instead. They weren't very active creatures, so most of the time, you would find them simply basking in the sun out in the open.

Their most notable characteristic was that they were tough, both their shells and their skin. A rusty knife would probably shatter if you used it against them. In fact, if you didn't know a precise technique, you wouldn't be able to damage them at all.

The usual method of hunting a stoneshell tortoise was to drop it into a perfectly sized hole, fill it with oil, and burn it alive. If it couldn't run, it would simply die. But such a method was purely for population control and wasn't very efficient if you wanted materials from it. Poison was another common method. It would leave more of the materials viable than the fire option. Essentially, hunting tortoises was inefficient. Weapons would break, poisons had to be potent enough to actually kill—never mind the extra costs that would involve—and fire pitfalls took time and effort to set up. It was a pain trying to collect the tortoise afterwards as well.

Plus, despite how much effort it took to kill them, they weren't actually worth that much money. In other words, it was commonly known among adventurers as an unprofitable hunt. However, from a different perspective, that could be convenient—the tortoises were essentially immobile targets, after all.

Lynokis stood behind one of the tortoises—though it was a whole head shorter than her, it was almost certainly much heavier.

Settle into stance.

Take a deep breath.

Swiftly step forward, and propel your fist forward.

A loud bang ripped through the air.

“Ow...!”

Lynokis writhed in pain. *It hurts. My fist hurts so much. It's like I punched an iron plate or something!* What was worse, the monster hadn't reacted at all—it was completely unscathed. It hadn't even realized it had been attacked.

As she thought, she couldn't call that punch Rumbling Thunder. Still, that had definitely been a fist cloaked in chi. There'd been enough strength in it that a human should've died had they been on the other end. And yet, there was absolutely no effect on the monster.

“Young Mistress...” Lynokis groaned.

Are you sure this isn't impossible for me? She began doubting herself, eyes filling with tears.

Nia had been the one who had chosen the stoneshell tortoise as her target. “Pick this. It'll be the perfect training partner for you,” she had said nonchalantly. Lynokis had also accepted without question. She had thought that this would be a piece of cake if she used her chi.

There was one thing Lynokis most certainly realized upon the bone-breaking pain coursing through her fist: this was most certainly training. Nia had ordered her to take down these tortoises as a way of telling her to get strong enough that she could take down a tortoise before returning.

“In other words, it's still a little early for me...”

For now, it was too early to take out her target. First, she had to properly perform the Technique even once. Ever since Nia had shown her the Technique over the summer vacation, Lynokis had been practicing punches whenever she had the time.

She still hadn't fired it off even once.

When she really thought about it, if she couldn't even manage it during training, how did she ever expect to manage it against a real living target? Even if it was a fluke, even if it was just chance, she had to fire it off just once, so she

could truly feel the Technique through her body and remember the sensation.

A full two days had passed since her first attempt.

“Are you...all right?”

The kind middle-aged lady at the inn worriedly greeted the rookie adventurer as she returned once more looking worse for wear.

It was night three on Metora Island, and Lynokis had again dragged her aching body back to her lodgings. She was covered in sweat and dirt, and she was utterly exhausted. There was no bath available to her, so all she could do was take a towel and hot water and give her body a wipe. After shoving something random into her stomach, she only had enough energy left to dive into bed. She had been doing the same thing for three days straight since arriving.

“Did you manage to catch anything today?”

Every day, Lynokis would go out from morning to night and come back absolutely exhausted—and the novice adventurer had absolutely no results to show for it. The innkeeper was worried about whether or not Lynokis would be able to pay, but more than that, she was worried about her skill as an adventurer.

And yet...

“No results today either!” They were the same words that Lynokis had said the day before, but this time her face was bright.

Focusing all her efforts on training had been worth it—she’d finally managed to successfully execute a Rumbling Thunder. Multiple times, in fact! After more than ten thousand attempts, she’d managed it once, and she’d repeated it over and over so she wouldn’t forget that sensation. In that process, she had managed to reach a stage where she could succeed once every fifty attempts.

With this, she could finally begin hunting tortoises.

The battle will begin tomorrow!

At least, that was what she had thought at the time. But when she went back

to the same place bright and early the next morning, all pumped up and ready to hunt some tortoises...

“Young Mistreeeeess!”

It took her thirty-seven attempts. Thirty-six failures against the unmoving turtle, and then finally, she succeeded at a Rumbling Thunder. She released a sound like a thunderbolt, and strength that didn't seem like it could possibly come from a fist slammed directly into the tortoise's shell.

But.

There was still no reaction.

The tortoise didn't move a muscle. Well, it moved a little bit. It moved its head as if it was looking for food. It didn't care that it just got hit with a shock wave. Actually, it probably didn't even notice. It was humiliating.

This is impossible! I thought I was supposed to be able to take them down with Rumbling Thunder! My fist hurts now too! Lynokis screamed internally, tears streaming from her eyes as she rubbed the fist she had nobly sacrificed. Never mind hunting a tortoise, she'd nearly broken her hand instead.

Lynokis honestly thought it impossible that this Technique could really hunt a tortoise. If she kept at it like this, her fist would become the hunted instead.

This was bad. She was sweating now for a completely different reason. She was due to leave either today or tomorrow, and she really had ended up with nothing to show for it. Not only had she not earned anything, they'd be at a loss with all the costs it'd taken to get here in the first place. It was a huge failure that only made the future seem far less promising.

Lynokis would have to report the results of this excursion to Nia. Nia was a calm girl, so it was unlikely she would get angry, but she might be disappointed. That was a far worse outcome to Lynokis.

She couldn't give up here. But...what else could she do?

Rumbling Thunder was a much more lethal weapon than the shortsword Lynokis wore for show. If it didn't work, she really would be out of options. At this rate, she could use the Technique all she wanted, and she'd get nowhere; it

was ineffective after all. Mindlessly repeating it would just kill her own fist. It was practically suicide for the poor limb.

“What should I do...?” Was Nia’s assessment of her wrong, or was the Rumbling Thunder that Lynokis had released simply not skilled enough? She had only just managed to execute it after all.

It’s probably the latter. Lynokis had undeniably learned how to fire off the Technique successfully, so the training had certainly gone as planned. The Rumbling Thunder that Nia had shown had been strong enough to completely part the waters of the island’s lake, but there was no way that Lynokis’s blows were of such strength. In other words, she really was just lacking power and skill. Skill wasn’t something she could do anything about in one or two days, though, and that left only one other option.

“I don’t really understand the logic behind this, but...”

The first thing that came to Lynokis’s mind was the Rumbling Thunder that Nia had showed off in the dungeon using a kick instead of a punch. If her hands weren’t strong enough, then what about her legs? Nia had definitely said that kicks held more power but were much more difficult to master. It seemed impossible for Lynokis to be able to manage it with her legs when she’d struggled so much to get a hang of it with her fists, but she couldn’t think of any other option.

If this didn’t work, she really would give up. She’d simply have to return to the airship in tears.

Though, honestly, Lynokis already had a big problem with this plan: she had no idea what the principle was behind releasing a Rumbling Thunder with her leg. She didn’t even know the basic form.

The one thing she could say about Rumbling Thunder now that she had succeeded a number of times was that the crux of the Technique was the speed of your step forward. It was like doing a tackle with your fist—at least, it was after she started viewing it that way that she had finally succeeded.

But how could you do a move like that with your *leg*?

To break down the basics of Rumbling Thunder: the energy started at the

pivot foot and was transmitted to the leg stepping forward, and the speed of your body was accelerated by twisting it exceedingly fast at the same time. When the energy of those linked movements was concentrated on the fist, what resulted was a superspeed strike at the moment that the timing of all those movements synced. Enhancing those movements with chi allowed it to become even stronger.

That was the Chi Fist: Rumbling Thunder that Lynokis had arrived at. When she'd had it explained to her at first, she'd questioned if it was really possible for her to do it at all, but now that she'd managed it, she realized she had more potential than she gave herself credit for.

How would she translate those steps to a version that used her leg, though? Either the pivot foot or the foot stepping forward was simply removed from the equation—one of them would have to do the kicking, after all. Now that she had succeeded at using the Technique, however, there was one thing she could say for certain: she definitely couldn't fire it off without both of those legs doing their jobs. She couldn't fathom the idea of losing either of them; it was only because of *both* of their functions that she managed to succeed at all.

"How are you supposed to step forward and kick at the same time?!" Lynokis had asked how Nia did it after she had demonstrated it in the dungeon.

"That is why you need to truly understand the Technique and perfect it. It is through understanding that you can adjust the skill" had been Nia's answer. In fact, Nia had shown Lynokis the Technique while also making it clear that she wouldn't tell her the principles behind it.

Nia's movements were always difficult to memorize. Even if Lynokis concentrated as hard as she could to commit it to memory, Nia's Technique was simply too beautiful. Her movements were amazingly fluid; it was so hard to tell the difference between her simply moving and her doing the required movements for the Technique. Before she knew it, the move was suddenly being executed. The transition between stillness and movement was undoubtedly terrifyingly fast—so fast that the unusual movement that would signal the start of the Technique couldn't register in your mind. It was as if Nia were skipping those movements entirely.

That had been the case in the dungeon as well. What Lynokis thought had been Nia hopping off the ground turned out to be the kicking Technique itself. She'd kicked the slime as nonchalantly as if she'd been on a stroll. There'd been no stance, no time spent to temper her chi, no hostility emitted from her body. Within regular, ordinary movements, a kick had suddenly made itself known. It was at such a speed that you would completely miss it if you weren't warned it was about to happen—no, you would miss it anyway. It was over before you even knew what was going on.

Lynokis knew by now that Nia was a Valiant Spirit, so she had simply accepted that that was just how she was... But honestly, Nia was so amazing that Lynokis couldn't even grasp just how amazing she was. She only felt this even deeper the more she learned about chi. Nia's martial arts had become one with her everyday life—that was why there was no difference in the movements. It was as if she was in a battle at every waking moment.

Nia had said that even at that level, her body was not perfected, that she still had not gotten in enough chi training, that her sense of battle had yet to return so she couldn't reach even a hundredth of the strength she'd had in her prime. That was likely not a lie, because there was no reason to tell such a lie in the first place. Even as a bluff, her current strength was already so unnatural, there was no need to pretend she was any stronger.

How much training would it take to reach such heights?

Well, now wasn't the time to worry over such things.

"Oh, I remember now."

Thinking back to Nia at that time, Lynokis realized there had in fact been a pivot foot. It'd been so fast she didn't remember the minute details of the move—well, she couldn't even see those details to begin with—but she did think she was right in remembering that Nia's pivot foot had remained.

Rumbling Thunder required both the pivot foot and the foot that stepped forward. Knowing that, they both had to be used somewhere. Even though it was a kick, that shouldn't be any different. Following that line of logic, the pivot foot would be the starting point of the Technique—the starting point of the movement itself. That wasn't something that could be removed. Nia herself had

even needed to keep the pivot foot in, so it was surely necessary.

Then what had happened to the foot that stepped forward?

Right. If she'd deduced that much, she could easily narrow down where the other leg was used. There *was* a place where there was a step forward—rather than into the ground, it was in the air through the kick itself.

“Oh?”

First, she needed to try the form. Running through her movements with careful intention, she made adjustments where necessary, then tried to recreate Nia's Rumbling Thunder kick. Through that process, she also ended up realizing it was much easier to focus her chi like this than she'd expected. In fact, she felt like she was using it much more easily than when she had been trying the punch.

“What? Seriously?”

Within only a few attempts, Lynokis had already managed it. It was a surprise even to herself. She was just kicking into the air, but she undeniably heard something like thunder. She was pretty sure the air was still wavering from where she had kicked, as well.

“Kick Techniques, huh?”

That was the moment that Lynokis realized she really was more suited to kicks than punches—not just by preference but also in terms of her natural talent.

In which case...

Practicing the Technique over and over, Lynokis found success came much faster than it had with her fists. She had already reached a point where she could pull it off once every twenty to thirty times. After diligently training from morning until dusk, she once more stood behind one of the tortoises.

If this didn't work, it was truly over for her. She would board the airship back that evening, no doubt crying the whole journey back. It would mean returning home not just empty-handed but at an actual financial loss. Nothing would be more humiliating.

“Hmph!” Exhaling a sharp breath, Lynokis got her pivot foot into position with

one step, twisted her body, and then fired. She imitated Nia's kick that still vaguely remained in her memories. At least, she was sure she did. She couldn't be sure since she really had failed to see the trajectory of Nia's kick at the time.



After failing several times, the eventual successful Technique let off a large shock wave. Along with the sound of a thunderclap, Lynokis thought she might've heard the sound of something cracking mixed in.

“OWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW?!”

The reason she only *thought* she had heard it was because her body was unable to withstand the recoil from the kick and was sent flying backwards; she hadn't had the leeway to listen very carefully. She violently rolled along the damp ground and finally came to a stop.

“OW! THAT REALLY HURTS!”

Lynokis rolled around on the ground at the incredible pain that shot through her kicking leg. Honestly, she was starting to think that the crack she'd heard was really the sound of it breaking.

Thankfully, after lying in pain for a while, she felt it slowly recede. Lynokis managed to stand herself back up and confirm that there was nothing wrong with her leg—she hadn't broken it after all. Though it still hurt.

Dragging her leg, Lynokis returned to the tortoise that had remained stock-still where she kicked it—and discovered the source of that sound.

“Huh...? I...did it...?”

The thick shell had cracked in two. The place where Lynokis had kicked it had a vertical crack running right through the middle of it. What was more, the tortoise was dead. Its long neck limply hung along the ground, blood streaming from its mouth.

It was as Nia had said: the outside might be tough, but the insides were weak. The impact from Rumbling Thunder had completely obliterated its organs.

“I did it...” she sighed not out of happiness, but purely relief.

I'm glad. More than the money, more than anything else, I'm glad I won't be leaving here as a disappointment to Nia.

While making sure to consult with her leg first, Lynokis managed to take down six of the tortoises. Any more and she really would break her leg, so she decided

to stop. Exhaustion and wearing down of her body would result in a decrease in concentration, and that meant a decrease in her ability to control her chi. At Lynokis's current skill level, make one wrong move and her leg would be done for. If she broke it because her focus wandered, she'd have to drag herself home crying.

Realizing that her exhaustion was building, Lynokis chose to end her hunt there before it turned into something worse. She returned to the port and got the assistance of the captain and his crew to haul the tortoises back.

"Damn, girl, you didn't do half bad."

Her lack of a catch had seemingly been worrying the captain too. Finally, though, she had been able to bring something back, and he was happy for her.

They set out a cargo carrier, and the four of them loaded the bodies of the tortoises on before hauling it back to the port again. They were only able to just barely fit on three at once, so they had to make multiple runs.

Lynokis left the processing of the tortoises to them so she could get some rest. Upon returning to her room, she asked for some hot water and wiped her body down with the towel. She was covered in sweat again today, and because of her tumble across the muddy ground, her clothes were in quite a state. She'd brought along a change of clothes at least, so she could wash those when she returned.

After taking a short nap, Lynokis headed to the branch of the adventurer's guild that was on the island and was directed to the warehouse where the tortoises were being processed. The captain and his men were talking among themselves while watching the professionals take the monsters apart.

The captain called out to her when he saw her arrive. "Apparently, you can get about two hundred thousand for one. If the shell was left untouched, it could've gone for three hundred, but, well, you kinda broke them all, so..."

That did sound like the market price she had been expecting. A simple calculation gave about one million two hundred thousand krams for the lot. Taking about one million away from that for travel fees and any other expenses, her actual earnings were about two hundred thousand krams.

Omitting the time she'd used on training, Lynokis had hunted six tortoises in less than half a day. If you thought of it as getting two hundred thousand krams in half a day, that was pretty good. Most rookie adventurers wouldn't be making that much. When you considered that she had even managed to fit in training around that, she really had raised quite a lot of money.

"How did you take them down?" one of the guild members asked. "I've never seen so many stoneshell tortoises taken down with so little damage."

Lynokis smiled and said, "It's a secret." She doubted they would even believe her if she were to say she'd simply given them a good kick. She didn't want to have to give them a demonstration if they asked for one, especially since her leg was honestly still kind of sore.

"Damn, that's a shame. Regardless, I think you can barter for a good price for the skin and meat. Skins that have no blemishes at all are especially valuable."

There were already various established methods of hunting stoneshell tortoises—immolation, boiling, poisoning—but none that could leave the tortoise relatively unscathed. If you used poison, the meat wasn't fit for consumption. If you burned it alive, the quality of both the skin and the meat decreased. Though Lynokis had damaged the shells and organs, everything else about the tortoises was untouched. Even if they weren't guild officials, anyone who had hunted one of these before would be curious how she had done it.

It was natural for an adventurer to have their own trade secrets, though; it was directly related to their income, after all, which was why the worker had so easily relented.

"Captain, let's head off once they've finished processing the tortoises," Lynokis said.

"Sure thing. You said Cedony could take the whole lot, yeah?"

"Yes, that's fine."

The trade association would take the meat and skin and then sell it off somewhere. They made their profits by carefully selecting and coordinating the companies they worked with. Lynokis decided to leave everything to the professionals, as selling the lot herself would take far too much time and effort.

“They’ll be done soon, so go get yourself ready to leave and come wait here or by the ship.” The captain nodded at Lynokis and then called over to his men: “Hey, we’re gonna get movin’ so start getting ready!”

With this, Lynokis had truly taken her first step as an adventurer.

“Here, some souvenirs.”

“Oh, uh...thanks.”

By the time Lynokis made it back to the capital, the sun had already set and the surroundings were dark. After stopping off at Cedony Trading to deal with any final paperwork to signify the completion of their deal, she headed for the Shifty Shadow Rat. She was going to turn this into one of Leeno the adventurer’s usual haunts, one of her bases of operations. For now, she was still a budding adventurer, so it didn’t mean all that much, but when her name began spreading, this would become a key location for Lynokis and Leeno to switch places.

“What’s that?” Fressa asked as she wandered over to stand beside Lynokis where she sat by the counter.

“Souvenirs, apparently,” Anzel responded. “This dried meat?”

“Dried tortoise meat, to be precise. They said it was a perfect snack to pair with beer.”

Tortoise meat tended to have an earthy smell because they lived near marshes. Whether boiled or grilled, the smell clung to it so much that it was deemed practically inedible, so it took a long drying process to remove the smell, turning it into a long-lasting food. Lynokis had been given a sample, and though it was quite tough to chew, it had tasted nice. The earthy smell was, in fact, completely gone, so she could eat it without issue. As such, she had decided to buy some as a souvenir, as a way to leave the impression that she got on well with the master of the bar she frequented. Anzel and Fressa had immediately given it a try.

“Hey, it’s not bad.”

“Oh, I might like this. Anzel, you should order more of this in. Let’s serve it

here.”

“Depends on the price. We can’t serve luxury food in a little place like this. Is it expensive?”

“It’s what you’d expect from a novelty aimed at tourists,” Lynokis said.

“So a bit expensive, then?” Fressa replied with a sigh.

“If that’s the case, then it ain’t suited for somewhere like this. I’ll still ask around and see what people say, though.”

The flowing conversation came to an awkward stop.

Fressa looked intently at Lynokis. “I’m not sure how to feel when you suddenly act polite to us.”

“I know, right?” Anzel agreed. “I was thinkin’ the same.”

Lynokis had actually rather frequently come to the Shifty Shadow Rat even before Nia had introduced her to Anzel and Fressa. Back then, her attitude towards them had been completely different than what it was now. Even Lynokis herself thought it a little funny. Back before they had been formally introduced to each other through Nia, she had been willing to go as far as killing their patrons if it meant keeping their mouths shut—and that wasn’t a joke.

“I have a duty to be cordial given my responsibilities,” she coldly stated, eyes fixed on the two in front of her. Those words had been a statement given by Lynokis, the attendant of the Liston family. However, the implicit meaning was that the one who was here right now was Leeno, the fresh-faced adventurer.

“Oh, thank goodness, it really is you, Lynokis. I was really beginning to think you were someone else for a second there,” Fressa said.

“Makeup’s crazy, damn. You seriously do look like someone else entirely.”

For the two at the bar, there were no problems...so long as they weren’t enemies.

“On the topic, do you happen to have any recommendations for makeup brands, Fressa?” Lynokis inquired.

“Hmmm. Well, there are all kinds of cosmetics out there, so rather than

brands, I'd be better off giving you recommendations based on your needs. Do you want it to be water-resistant? Sweat-resistant? Will you be keeping it on for a long time? Is it for use on the battlefield?"

"The battlefield?"

"Yeah, as in, is it something you intend to use in a fight under the sheets with a man."

"Oh."

"Hey, a customer's calling," Anzel scolded. "Get back to work, missus."

Lynokis had two drinks before leaving out the back entrance. The school gates were closed in the evenings and so strictly regulated that even staff couldn't get in past curfew. That of course meant she couldn't return to the dorms right at the moment. In which case, she'd spend the night at her apartment and return in the morning.

"Hey there, cutie, what's a pretty face like you doin' all the way out here?"

"How much you goin' for? That's why you're here, right?"

Any nosy little thugs would get a light beating. Lynokis was well-known around these parts as a dangerous maid, but Leeno was still unknown as a rookie adventurer. Since she was working as a new identity entirely, she had no choice but to start building her reputation from scratch.

This could be considered another activity required to make her name known. She would give them enough of a scare that they wouldn't completely flee the underworld. She needed them alive and well enough to spread the rumors of the adventurer Leeno, after all.

After a bit of messing around, she eventually made it back to her apartment.

What to do now?

It was already evening but still much too early to sleep. Lynokis felt hungry, but she still had some rations left on her, so she preferred to finish those first. She'd only wiped her body down with a towel while on the island, so she wanted to take a real bath now, but...honestly, she was so tired she wanted to go right to bed. Her leg still hurt a little too.

“Lynokiiiiiiis!”

Before she could, however, Sharro dropped by. Apparently, she had spotted Lynokis returning as she was walking home herself, so she’d decided to pay a visit.

“You just got back, didn’t you? Let’s go for a bath and have dinner together. You still don’t know this area super well, right?” It appeared Sharro was trying to be considerate, especially if she was offering to help show her around.

“I was actually planning to head to sleep. I’m quite tired.”

Lynokis had to return to the dorms the next day, so she wanted to get a good, refreshing rest. The idea of a bath was very tempting, but she didn’t have the energy to go all the way to one.

“Really? Oh well,” Sharro sighed. “Lucida and a few others said they’d come too, so I thought you’d like to come, but I guess not.”

“I’ll go.”

Suddenly, she had no reason to refuse. If one of the Twin Ice Princes would be there, there was no way she could pass up the chance. A bath and a meal with her idols? It was like a dream come true.

“Aha, so you *are* a fan of Julian and Lucida, huh?”

“Yes, I’m a fan.”

Those dazzling stars she had seen on magivision had turned out to be just as dazzling even in person. How could she *not* become their fan? She’d had the opportunity to take in so much of their presence at Nia’s recording over the summer that she’d thought she would die. She couldn’t wait for it to finally be aired.

“So you’re not *my* fan, then? Even though I’m the up-and-coming lead actress Sharro White?”

“Hm? Ah, yes, uh-huh. Maybe, maybe not. Who cares, let’s go!”

“Talk about vague. Well, whatever. I’ll become a big star soon. I’ll make you regret not getting my autograph.”

Lynokis would be back to the dorm life starting tomorrow. She'd been thinking she'd better tell Sharro that she'd be leaving for a while, so their chance meeting was fortunate.

As it turned out, she ended up having not just a bath, not just dinner, but even drinks with all the members of the theater company, including Julian himself. As a fan, she had never spent a happier night.

That was how the adventures of Leeno began.

Epilogue

On the third night of Lynokis's island adventure, Lynette came by my room once again.

"If things go according to plan, she should take around four to five days. If not, seven days at the longest," I answered when she asked about Lynokis's return. Weather could very easily affect travel time, so it was more of a ballpark; the schedule had not been firmly decided.

"You have to make a billion krams in two years, after all. You'll never make it if you take your time," Lynette remarked. As she was now also my disciple, I'd filled her in on the details of the plan. I would most likely have Lynette go out and earn money at some point as well given I was training her specifically so she could offer up money to me.

Thankfully, she was a smart cookie. She might have had more potential than even Lynokis did. She was incredibly worth my time. Gandolph wasn't so bad either. He was someone that never saw training as a burden, which meant he could improve even more than I'd initially expected.

I hoped they could all view each other as competition and achieve even greater heights together.

"You came round awfully early today, didn't you? Is my brother all right?" I couldn't help but ask. As much as Neal might be an early sleeper, surely this was a bit *too* early. It was literally right after dinner. I had just finished mine and was about to start my homework.

"When I told him that I'd like to look after you while Lynokis was gone, he granted me much more free time. Young Master Neal promised me that he wouldn't leave his room while I came to check up on you. I believe he should be doing his homework as you were about to."

If I had made such a promise, I would most certainly have used it as a way to sneak out unnoticed. I would have gone right out for a night of fun. Well, maybe

it was a bit too early to call it a *night* of fun.

Hm... Actually, I guess I wouldn't.

I *had* learned after the incident with the Umbral Arena. I had decided I would never sneak out in that manner again. If I were to leave, I would do it boldly out the front door.

“Okay, I’ll get my homework done and then we can go to the dojo.”

Recently, I had been going out to the dojo at night to supervise Lynette and Gandolph’s training. Truthfully, it usually wasn’t permitted to leave the dorm past curfew, but I had managed to pull some strings with Hildetaura’s assistance and gain special permission to do so. So long as I didn’t leave the school grounds and only went to the Heavenstriker dojo, they would grant me permission.

I’d given the excuse that because I was usually so busy, I’d like extra time to exercise. Since I used to be sickly, I wanted to train my body so I would never become that ill again—I wanted to continue the methods of remaining healthy I had been doing for a while. That was enough to convince them. Technically, I wasn’t lying, so I didn’t think it was inherently an issue. Gandolph had helped corroborate my story, so I could definitely keep this going for a while. It would potentially cause issues in the future, but I’d cross that bridge when I got to it.

“Wait there while I finish. Oh, though you can go ahead if you’d like.”

“Please be quick so we can leave.”

Tch... If Lynette wasn't here, I could be watching some of the restricted channels on magivision by now. These attendants were so *vigilant*. It was like they had no openings.

“Nia! Are you here?!”

Suddenly, my brother’s voice rang out along with a heavy knock on the door. Lynette swiftly opened it, causing Neal to practically tumble inside.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. This wasn’t like Neal at all—he was so frantic, so panicked. This was worrying. Had he made a girl cry?

“Y-Your MagiPad! Are you not watching it?!”

“Huh? Watching what?”

It would get in the way of my homework, so I hadn’t been watching anything. I wasn’t even allowed to watch the channels I wanted to see anyway. And currently, I was being very strictly observed.

“Put on the Silver Channel! Right now!”

What revolutionary program were they airing that had Neal *this* flustered? As much as I would have liked to see for myself, though, I couldn’t.

“Brother, it’s forbidden for me to watch anything on the Silver Channel.” I would have loved to turn it on right then, but I hadn’t been given permission.

“I will make a special exception as your brother! I’ll make sure to report to father later, so just turn it on! Lynette, please!”

Maybe this really was something to be worried about.

Lynette silently took out the MagiPad, and I put my pen down. We were likely thinking the same thing: we should listen to Neal right now.

What awaited was a most brilliant scene.

The program came to a close. I had been captivated from start to finish.

“Their speed is insane...” The moment it ended, that was all I could say.

You’re asking for it now, Silvers.

They had stolen my paper play project from right under my nose only a few weeks ago, and they had already brought it to life. That was exactly what had just aired on their channel.

The images had simply been art, voices, and sound effects. The new and innovative style of picture had a strange power to pull in anyone who watched. That was the power of art—the power of Rikelvita’s artistic talent.

This was purely a hunch. A hunch with absolutely nothing to support it, but...Neal was likely thinking the same thing as I was. That was why he had come dashing all the way to my dorm. Hildetaura was no doubt thinking the same thing from the castle.

This was a winner.

The paper play we'd just watched was a winning project, no doubt. They had struck gold in a way that made my dog program look horrifically insignificant in comparison. This would surely—no, *definitely* be popular.

It was like I'd just watched a gigantic fish swim right out of my grasp.

Being strong wasn't enough anymore. This truly was a most troublesome era.

Afterword

This summer, I took a picture of a lizard with a really long tail.

Hello, it's Umikaze Minamino here.

It's currently August 2023 as I write this. Summer was as hot as always this year. But by the time this ends up on the shelves, it should be much cooler.

I have been blessed to be able to release this third volume. That's *three* volumes. If you think about it like *Dragon Quest*, that means it's like the real masterpiece classic *Dragon Quest III*, originally released on the Famicom, a super retro console that I'm sure many people no longer remember. *Dragon Quest III* has been remade several times and even now is loved by gamers as one of the best in the series. I think this was where the Sage vocation was introduced.

What I'm trying to say is that this volume is like the *DQ3* of *Nia Liston*. Isn't that amazing? This volume was *DQ3* all along. Okay...maybe not quite.

There's been a change in illustrator starting from this volume. JISHAKU-sensei, who had previously been in charge of illustrations, has actually been struggling with health issues for a while. It was too difficult for them to continue, so there was a change in artist. It seems they pushed themselves really hard for volume 2...

It's a shame, but I don't think there was any other choice. I hope one day we can work together again.

Instead, Katana Canata-sensei will be taking over. They've been an illustrator on many light novels before mine, so I think their art will be familiar to many of you. Their art is truly beautiful. I look forward to working with them more.

The second volume of the manga will release at the start of September. It's so well-done that I actually think it beats my light novels in enjoyment. Please check it out if you haven't already—especially chapter 10. Lynokis's little temper tantrum continues for a whole four pages. It's a wonderful moment.

Kodai-sensei, thank you for always drawing it in such a fun way. I'm looking forward to more volumes.

I would also like to say thank you to S-san, my editor. There were a lot of parts in this volume that weren't in the original web novel, and they gave me so much advice. I'm glad this could come to fruition. I look forward to continuing working with you.

Finally, to all my readers. It's thanks to you that this third volume was able to happen. Talking about volume 3, this is like *Dragon Quest* because— Never mind, enough of this bit. I am so incredibly thankful that I've been able to publish this far. Thank you very much. I'll do my best while praying this can continue for volumes to come.

Let's meet again in volume 4, which I'm sure we will get to release!

Bonus Short Stories

Summer Shopping

“Young Mistress, we should start getting ready.”

Summer vacation was almost over. The end of that long break was finally in sight after such a grueling work schedule back home. And then Lynokis sprang those words upon me when I was doing my morning routine in a capital hotel.

“Start getting what ready? Am I not getting ready right now?” I was in the process of getting changed for the recording I had today.

“Oh, no, I mean we should go shopping, since you’ll be going on the island trip soon, right?”

“Right!”

It *was* almost time for my true vacation! Just a few more days! I had been waiting for so long!

The last five days of the summer break were finally approaching. Now that it was this close, my mood was much better, and I could more easily muster up the energy to work hard. Besides, the only part of my schedule that had *really* been tough was the part that I’d done back home. Bendelio would never get away with it. I’d beat him up the first chance I got.

“I was thinking that we should start making preparations for the trip,” Lynokis elaborated.

So that was what she meant. Of course we’d need to make preparations!

Or...did we? What was there to prepare?

“Is there anything we actually need to buy?” I asked. Our destination was a floating island owned by royalty; wouldn’t everything we need already be there? I guess my loathed homework counted as a hang-up, but I’d made sure to gradually chip away at that over the past few weeks, so I’d almost finished it.

Lynokis had been watching me the whole time. Personally, I thought I'd done a great job. I was proud.

"Of course there is! The most important thing!" Lynokis said with a glimmer in her eye.

The most important? What?

Horried at my cluelessness, Lynokis instead shouted the answer at me: "Swimsuits! Swim! Suits! We're going on vacation! It's summer! What else do you think of other than swimming and baring your skin?!"

Why are you so enthusiastic about this?

I was more than a little suspicious of her intentions...but she had a point. Hildetaura *had* said that there was a lake we could swim in on the island. I'd promised Reliared I'd play with her too, I think. It all felt so long ago now that my memory was fuzzy.

No, I'd definitely made a promise like that.

"You're right, we should buy some swimsuits."

"I know! We should, right?!"

We should, but you agreeing so enthusiastically makes me wonder if I'll regret this.

"And!" Lynokis continued. "You've got some free time during this morning's recording, right? I was thinking we could take that opportunity to pop out and buy some!"

"Okay."

Lynokis may have been acting suspicious, but I couldn't deny that I needed a swimsuit. I'd probably end up using it. Bodies of water were good for training in, as well. Though, honestly, even if I didn't have a swimsuit, I was perfectly fine training naked.

"Then let's do that. Do you know where we—"

"I've looked them up! There are fourteen stores selling children's swimwear; four in particular have a wide variety of types, quality, and other essentials! We

can cut it down to two stores if we choose those that are closest to the recording location! Let's think long and hard about the perfect swimsuit from these two shops! We'll find a swimsuit that perfectly complements your prettiness and cuteness and femininity and loveliness! I've already got my eye on some!"

Really now. I see. Glad to know I have someone so skilled at information gathering. This was all a little... Well, it was fine. I didn't understand why Lynokis was so excited to see me in a swimsuit when she already saw me naked practically every day. But I didn't need to understand her motives to know that she looked like she was having fun, so who was I to ruin that?

"What kind of swimsuit would you like, Young Mistress?! A one-piece?! Or a sexy bikini?! A really raunchy one?!"

I really did not care what type it was.

"Ahh, I'm so excited! This is going to be such a great day!"

I was nothing but suspicious of her motivations.

And that was what led us to go swimsuit shopping, during which Lynokis ultimately bought one of her own.

Two New Disciples

Around the same time Lynokis went off to begin her life as an adventurer, I acquired two new disciples.

"And that's why she'll be training with us as well."

The first night we went to the Heavenstriker dojo for a training session, I briefly introduced Lynette Bran, my brother's personal attendant, to Gandolph, who was kneeling on the floor. Lynette had been Lynokis's classmate while they studied at the Department of Adventuring in middle school; though apparently, it was a coincidence that they'd ended up working for the same family.

Lynette was tall for a woman, but beyond that, there was nothing particularly remarkable about her. She was decently strong as Neal's bodyguard, but decent was where it ended. She would maybe serve as a good opponent for Gandolph

at least, though the fact she knew how to wield a sword meant she was likely to win a battle to the death between the two; at their level, the ability to use a weapon could make all the difference.

“Pleasure to train with you,” she said.

“Same here,” Gandolph responded in kind.

They’d already seen each other around, so the introductions were easy enough.

And now onto the main topic.

“First, I need both of you to learn how to manipulate what we call ‘chi,’ but before that, I also need to let you know my objective,” I explained, as they both knelt in front of me. “Two years from now, I want to hold a large-scale national tournament.”

“A national tournament?!” Gandolph enthusiastically lunged forward. His eyes were sparkling.

Isn’t it amazing to think about? I was talking about a competition to determine who was the strongest in the country—and perhaps even neighboring countries. Of course he would be curious. The king being so nonchalant about it all was the real crazy one.

That said, Lynette’s reaction was also quite subdued, given she wasn’t a martial artist herself. She seemed mildly interested at best. The contrast between the calm and collected attendant still kneeling politely and the large man leaning forward out of excitement was incredible.

“For that purpose, I need to raise a large sum of money. One billion krams, to be precise.”

“One billion?!”

“Oh, that’s why Lynokis...” Lynette muttered.

Isn’t it amazing to think about? A billion krams is an absolute fortune. At least, that’s what those around me had said. I had no real sense for how much that actually was. The only thing I understood was that it was a lot of money.

“And that’s why, in exchange for my training, I want you both to find the time

to go out and raise some money. Of course, I won't force either of you, especially since you have your own jobs that make it harder to travel freely."

"Yes, well... I live within the campus, so it's a little difficult for me to go very far," Gandolph said. Given what I was asking of them, it wouldn't be enough for him to just pop out for a bit at night either. Gandolph had been officially sent to Altoire Academy from the main dojo to serve as an instructor here. Apparently, even his pay was coming directly from the main dojo.

"My job is to remain by the young master's side, so I can't really afford to be away from him for long periods of time..." Lynette was my brother's personal attendant. No one sane would think it would be a good idea to leave your charge behind to go out working somewhere else. Work aside, she didn't want to stay too far away from Neal in general—to a suspicious degree.

"I know. As I said, I won't force either of you to do this. I simply wanted to keep you informed." I wouldn't say I *wasn't* expecting anything from them either, though. They could help me out as suited them best.

"Training and actual battles are different; the divide between doing drills independently and hitting a real, living opponent is particularly wide. Experiencing these kinds of differences in a real battle is an inevitability. Preferably, I'd like you to get both training and real experience in equal measure. If you don't, you have no chance at winning against Lynokis in the tournament. I'm training her to be a victor, after all."

Nerves, hesitation, performing in front of a huge audience—factors like these could often make one's strength waver. That was why it was important to get as much real experience as possible. It was an important aspect of a martial artist's skill that simply couldn't be polished through training alone. At the very least, neither of them were beginners. They'd understand without me droning on about it.

"Is this not a good opportunity for you to save face from your previous loss?" I asked Gandolph directly.

"You're right... I've already lost to her once, after all." It had happened back at the club fair just before I'd started school, so everyone in attendance had mostly likely forgotten by now, but there was no way the man himself would

forget. Tasting defeat as a martial artist always left a deep impression.

“Do you not view Lynokis as a rival or something to that effect, Lynette?”

“No, not particularly.”

Made sense. They were old friends, after all.

“That said, given we are both personal attendants, if the difference in our strength is blatant, I can’t help but be concerned.” She found her competitive mindset because they were coworkers, probably similar to how I couldn’t help but be interested in other strong fighters.

“And that’s why I will be training you under the assumption that I’m preparing you for the tournament two years from now,” I said. “Whether you participate or not is entirely your decision, but that’s how I’ll be training you.”

Arbitrary training could have its benefits, but having a very clear goal worked far better as far as motivation was concerned. If there really existed a tournament in which I could face those stronger than me, my obsession with my training would be vastly different.

No point wishing for the impossible though. I wasn’t even of an age that I could enter, so I needed to remain patient for now.

“Hm, okay, I see now.”

I sparred with the two of them to get a sense of their skill and talent. Gandolph confirmed my impression of him as a solid man. He had a lot of muscle mass weighing him down—meaning his movements were slow. His reaction speed wasn’t bad though, so he’d already learned to adjust to some degree.

Unfortunately, if I were to teach him chi as is, he’d just become a walking target. The only battlefields he knew were ones where raw strength was all that mattered. Still, it wasn’t like I expected anything different from him. I vaguely recalled that someone would usually be trained in chi before they reached this point, and then build their body depending on their style of fighting. Gandolph, on the other hand, would be learning how to use chi after already over-building his body.

He was an interesting little gem indeed. If Gandolph were to learn a style that allowed him to hold his own in the realm of chi, then...

“You’re definitely more suited to countering. In other words, you want to control the opponent *after* they attack.”

“After they attack?”

“Yes. Block their initial attack, and then counter. With your body type, that will be what will suit you best. There is no need for you to get the first hit in.” If he learned to heighten his fortification chi, he could block even shoddy blades or needles. This would be the best style for Gandolph to focus on.

Naturally, there would come a time where he would be faced with a situation where countering wasn’t enough, such as when pitted against a projectile user. You couldn’t exactly counter something coming at you from a distance like that. Once he reached that wall, I had no doubt he would find his own way onto the next stage of his training. All I would teach him was the foundations of chi. I had no intention of teaching him how to fight. Once Gandolph learned how to control it, he simply needed to get stronger with the Heavenstriker style. I would be exceedingly happy if he became so strong that I couldn’t ignore him.

Next was Lynette.

“You’re quite the balanced fighter, Lynette. Continue to train as you have been.”

As a sword fighter, Lynette had nothing especially notable. Not in the sense that she was bad, but that everything about her was equally trained to a high level. Such balanced training started off as boring, plain, and lacking in versatility, but once the fighter had passed a certain level, their skill would improve to an unnatural degree—*especially* after learning sword Techniques close to an Ultimate.

Honestly, I had absolutely no memory of sword Techniques, but surely I’d remember something when the time came. Weapons weren’t my forte, but I knew I’d fought against many a weapon wielder. Enough to get sick of them. So I was surely capable of recalling something.

Lynokis had been similar to Lynette when I first started training her, but she’d

had a strong focus on speed—the kind of fighter that would take advantage of preemptive attacks.

“Continue as I have been? Um...do you not have any more detailed advice you could supply me?”

Hm, she seemed to want me to say something more. Maybe because my advice towards her was notably less involved than Gandolph’s.

Let’s see...

Honestly, I wasn’t sure what else I could tell her. I didn’t say anything more because I had nothing else to say.

“There’s no need to add any strange quirks to your style, is there? You’re still teaching my brother swordplay after all. If your style becomes too skewed, it would potentially cause problems for his traini—”

“Yes, that’s true. I’ll get stronger then, all for Young Master Neal,” she suddenly replied.

Ah. Okay.

“All for Young Master Neal.”

You don’t have to say it twice. You’re only getting more suspicious.

Why did I have this tendency to attract the quirkiest of people? First Lynokis and now Lynette. Why were these personal attendants so overflowing in *strangeness*? What was that all about?

And that was how my training with my two new disciples began.



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