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2

Nia Tiston

The Merciless Maiden



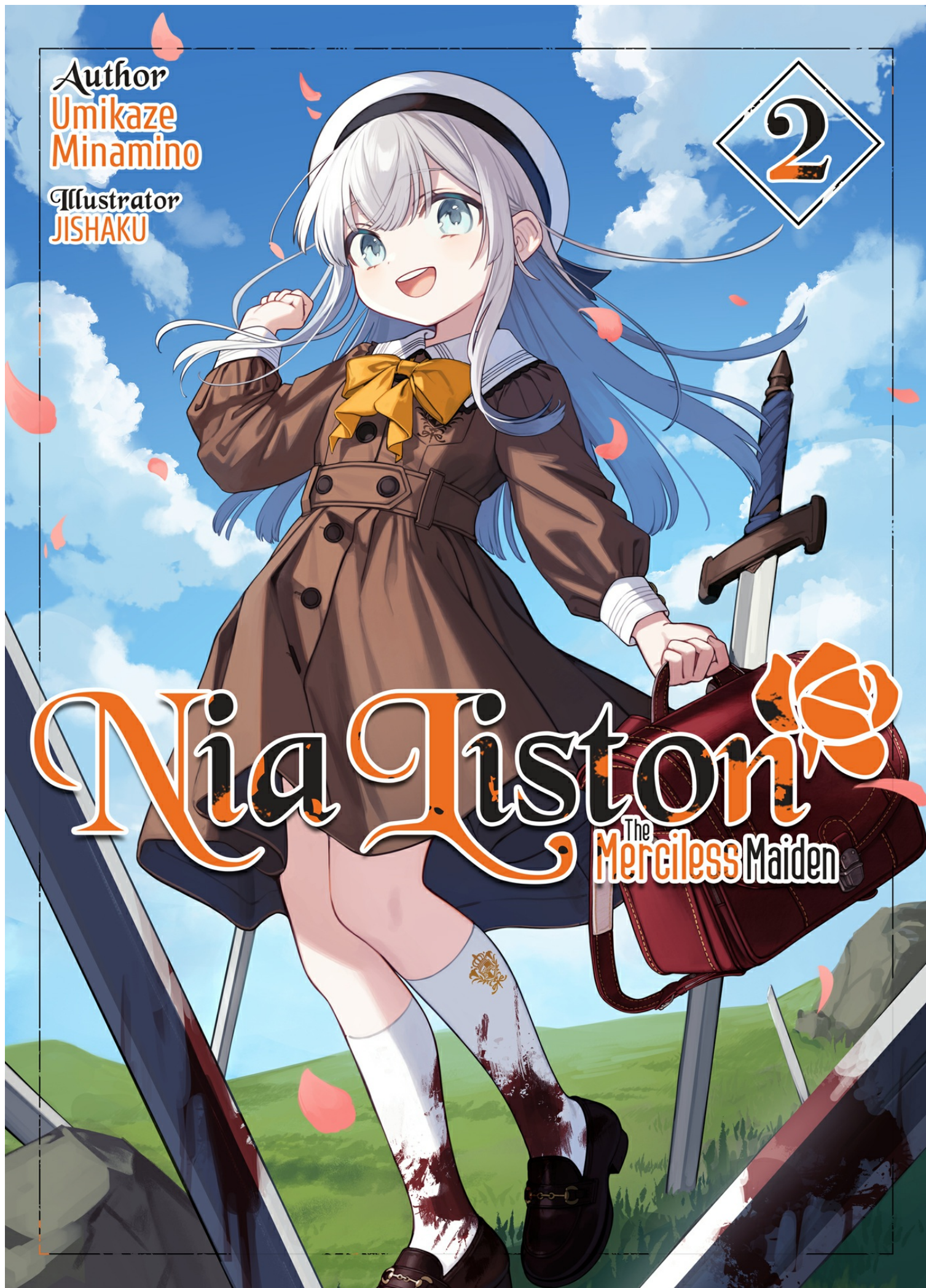
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An exclusive look at the
magivision idels' uniforms!

Altoire Elementary's

Girls' Uniform



"You think
my skirt's
short? But
it's totally
cute, right?"

Check it!
*Reliared
Silver*

With a petticoat peeking
out from under her short
skirt, and red shoes to
match her blazing hair, if
this girl is going to break
school rules, she's going
to break them in style!



"The subdued palette
is appreciated
while I carry out my
royal duties."

Check it!
*Hildetaura
Altoire*

The flowy, dress-like skirt
helps show off the elegance
of a young lady!

"It's a very good
uniform. Shame
blood would stand
out on it though."



Hat
(unisex)



The school's crest
is embroidered on
the uniform pocket.

Uniform

A camel hair sailor dress that
opens at the front. Designed
so that the yellow bow stands
out. The collar is lined with
white trim, and gold buttons
serve as an accent.

Socks
(with school crest)

Brown bit loafers

Check it!
Nia Liston

Standard skirt length,
standard socks, standard
loafers, an incredibly
standard fit.

Altoire Elementary's

Boys' Uniform



Check it!

Neal Liston

Standard socks, standard loafers, an incredibly standard fit.



The school's crest is embroidered on the uniform pocket.

Uniform

Similar to the girls' uniform, the boys' uniform features a camel hair double-breasted blazer, designed in a way that makes the yellow tie stand out. The collar is lined with white trim, and gold buttons serve as accents on various parts of the uniform.

School bag (unisex)



Socks
(with school crest)

Black penny loafers

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Prologue

Seeing them here is certainly a rare sight. Or would it be more appropriate to say that this is a first?

Today was the final day of recording. Once I was done here, there would be no more shoots for episodes of *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation* for a while.

This episode featured a confectionery. We went straight to the kitchen so I could make some sweets with one of the confectioners.

Once I laid my eyes on the cakes and pies on display, I could tell right away that they were a culmination of deft and meticulous skills. When you put any of them in your mouth, they were so delicate they would melt away instantly, and yet they were surprisingly physically demanding to make.

Do I still have to mix it? I guess so. "Meringue," did they call it? I don't really know what that is, but I'll give this meringue my all. Or a bit of my all at least.

The recording was going smoothly. Nothing was particularly unusual for me. There may have been things that had surprised me when I first started my magivision work, but I was already used to it. Repetition only made one become accustomed to a task. Martial arts were learned in a similar fashion, after all.

"Wait, Nia, that's enough. You can stop!" The woman who was teaching me frantically interrupted as my whisking reached an intensity intended to beat the whisk and bowl into oblivion.

Such small incidents as this are commonplace in this line of work, anyway. Of course that wasn't deliberate on my part. I'm just not that dexterous.

It was a recording session like any other, a carefree atmosphere like any other, though my parents' presence very decidedly *not* like any other.

On occasion, they would come watch if they happened to be in the area, but I believed this was the first time they had come to observe one of my shoots from start to end. However, since I wasn't really a child, I didn't particularly care if they came to watch me or not.

Once we wrapped for the day, I went to a restaurant with them to have dinner.

“We won’t see each other for a while, after all,” my father reminded me.

My work schedule had been so packed that I hadn’t been thinking of anything beyond it. Today’s recording was my last. Recently, I had simply been focusing on overcoming that. But my father was right; I would be leaving the Liston territories for a while soon.

“Is that why you both came to watch?” I asked my parents.

Now that I had finished today’s recording, there wouldn’t be another one for a while.

Because I would finally be entering the dorms of Altoire Academy.

If I recalled correctly, I would be in the dorms by tomorrow night. Once I boarded the airship to the capital later today, the next time I would return home would be the summer break. My parents most likely wanted to make sure they saw their daughter before she left home for so long.

Were I actually Nia, would I simply be happy that they had come to visit me? Or would I feel sadness at the thought of being separated from them for such a long time? “‘I don’t want to live far away from you! I want to go home!’ Is that what I should say?” I thought I should ask and see.

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that,” my father instantly refused.

Meanwhile, my mother worried about my mental state with a “Are you okay? Has recording so many episodes in a row made you tired?”

Well, that wasn’t quite the reaction I’d expected. It seemed I may have been acting a bit too businesslike for a child up until now. My parents had accepted that this was the kind of girl I was.

It was fine, though. I could be Nia’s replacement, but I could never be *her*.

What was I thinking...after all this time?

A whole year and a half had passed since I became Nia. Both the complications with this body and my thoughts towards the true Nia had come and gone. There was no reason for me to be concerned with how I was living

my life this far down the line.

Chapter 1: The Brother's Greeting, the Girls' Meeting

In the Kingdom of Altoire, it was mandatory for children aged between six and twelve to attend the Royal Altoire Academy.

It was a system that was created upon the concern that powerless children could barely contribute to society, never mind do manual labor, and so until that time came, children would instead be made to put pen to paper. Apparently, it wasn't all that rare for some families to still use their children for labor, but a law created by a king from generations ago could not so easily be overturned.

Apparently, there used to be a school exclusively for nobles, but that had been abandoned long ago. These days, whether the child of an aristocrat, a farmer, or royalty—unless there were extenuating circumstances—all children would study at Altoire Elementary.

It was permitted for those who lived in the capital to commute from home, but the large majority of students came from the surrounding floating islands, so they had no choice but to live in the dorms during the semester.

And so, I would be joining the other children of Altoire and living at the dorm myself.

Since I needed to be in the Liston territories until my last recording for *Occupation Observation*, I was scheduled to board the airship the night prior to my enrollment so that we would arrive at the royal capital in the morning.

This way, we get to sleep while we travel, hm?

Neal had mentioned that long-distance travel was pleasant once before and I was inclined to agree. It was an efficient use of our time.

"I remained at Altoire Academy until the end of middle school," Lynokis told me when I asked her about the school as we ate our breakfast in the airship's

mess hall.

“Ah, you had mentioned that, hadn’t you?” I had heard bits and pieces about her school life before now, but this was the first time I’d directly asked her about it. In fact, I’d only recently heard that education was compulsory here. It was quite surprising to me. I was just going because my parents had told me to; I didn’t think it was an obligation.

What was more, it turned out that all our tuition and meal fees were already paid for by the school. No wonder they were able to gather children from all walks of life. I wasn’t a politician, so I didn’t have the knowledge to know if it was a good policy or not, but personally, having the citizens’ taxes returned to them in such a visible manner was not a bad way to govern.

“You graduated from the Department of Adventuring, right?”

“Yes.”

For now, I would spend six years at the elementary school of the academy. Whether or not I would continue on to middle school would be a decision that could come later. After elementary school, families had to pay the school fees directly, after all.

Lynokis chose to continue to the end of middle school. It was apparently the norm for aristocratic children to finish their middle school education at the bare minimum before graduating. It was a so-called show of one’s nobility.

“Middle school lasts for three years, with high school another three. There is also a royal college above that which only the most gifted children are invited to based on their grades and achievements.”

Hmm, honestly speaking, I had no confidence in my book smarts, so stopping after elementary would probably be fine for me. Or at least, that was my personal opinion, but really, I would just do as my parents wished. If they wanted me to continue past elementary, as the one within Nia’s body, I would have no choice but to do so.

I’m terrible at using my head, though. Headbutts aside.

“Things are going to get so busy...” Everything had become noticeably more hectic since I began my magivision career last spring, and I would now be trying

to maintain a recording schedule on top of my school schedule.

I had been dragged all over the place last year for magivision. Thanks to those efforts, viewership had increased within the Liston territories. There was no point in stopping the offensive here—I had to keep appearing on magivision more and more so that sales of the MagiPads would continue to increase and the culture of magivision would continue to spread.

It was hard to say that the magivision industry was stable as things were. I wasn't sure of the specifics of the Liston family's finances, but the possibility most certainly existed that they were still working at a loss.

In any case, I had to earn, earn, and earn even more if I wanted to protect this family. That was the duty I had to bear.

"Ah, that reminds me," Lynokis said, interrupting my musing. "I've heard the capital's broadcasting station has expressed interest in having you get involved in their programs."

"So I've heard." Bendelio had wandered over to one of my shoots for a change and told me about it with his distinctive face. "Perhaps I should go introduce myself to them at some point." If I did that, it would be useful to leverage the help of Mrs. Rhyme to arrange a meeting with them.

No matter what broadcasting station I worked with, the program would be viewable from the Liston territories. That meant that there would be no harm in me picking up job offers from other territories. My appearance alone would serve as an advertisement for both myself and the Liston Channel. Given I would receive payment for it too, I could ask for nothing better.

Honestly, right now, I was far more concerned for my magivision work than my school life. I would be living in the dorms starting today, and that meant I would have to record episodes while also going through dorm life. It would no doubt be even more of a struggle to get in appropriate martial arts training.

Right as I finished my breakfast, the Royal Capital of Altoire came into view. We landed in the port right before noon. The port was as busy as always, but there were especially many children. They were likely all elementary school students who would be entering Altoire Academy, same as myself.

There was a group of kids in ragged clothes marveling at the sight around them. Presumably, they were all from the same place. The kids who were dressed well and with their own servants accompanying them were no doubt the children of aristocrats.

The airship I had used to travel here was the vintage airship I had borrowed from my brother. Neal was busy, so he hadn't returned home over the spring break. Apparently, that was normal as it was a rather short holiday period.

"Nia!"

Neal had made sure to arrive at the port in time to pick me up. He had arrived with his personal attendant, Lynette. His beauty that charmed both boys and girls alike was attracting the attention of the people around us.

"Nice to see you, brother. It has been quite some time."

"Yeah, probably since winter, right? I'm glad you look healthy." Neal took my small bag off my hands with no hesitation. Hmm, it appeared he had been training to be an appropriate gentlemanly escort, as well. The number of girls' hearts he'd break some day was only increasing.

Huh?

There was a girl sticking by my brother's side. I had thought she was some random passerby at first, but no, she was most certainly accompanying him. You weren't likely to hover so close to some stranger.

The girl was wearing a well-tailored dress, and a wide hat that was casting a shadow over her face, making it hard to see her features. She appeared to be around the same age as us.

"Who is this? Your girlfriend?" I asked.

"What? No, uh... Don't say something like that," Neal frantically muttered, contrary to his usual calm and collected demeanor.

"Nice to meet you, Nia Liston. I finally get to make your acquaintance."

The girl's voice rang out clear as a bell as she slightly raised the brim of her hat. She had a face as beautiful as her voice, though her eyes were very unique. She had green irises and a dot of red inside their pupils.

As the girl stared at me with her strange eyes, I felt like I was hallucinating, charmed by what I was witnessing. Those strangely colored eyes...

“Ah! Nia Liston!”

What brought me back was the booming voice of another girl beside me. She had blazing red hair and a bold shine held within gray eyes. *Have I seen her somewhere before?*

This was my first meeting with the third princess of Altoire, Hildetaura, and the youngest daughter of Vikson Silver, aristocrat of the fifth class, Reliaed.

“Hee hee. That was fun!” the mysterious hatted girl said.

Was it? All I’d done was run my normal way.

On the contrary, the red-haired girl was positively fuming. “Why did you suddenly run away like that?!” What use was it getting mad at me? I was the one who had been dragged here.

No thanks to the red-haired girl yelling my name at the top of her lungs, we had attracted much undesired attention at the port. Among the commoners who didn’t have the finances, magivision was yet to spread, so they may not have known me, but among the children of aristocrats who no doubt had the money for at least one MagiPad per household, my name was famous.

We had already been attracting some rather rude stares, but then a name that I absolutely could not ignore had been uttered. Just as I was wondering if I had misheard, the hatted girl had grabbed my hand and run.

Though the move had been sudden, Lynokis, Neal and Lynette had all calmly followed, while the red-haired girl for some reason had shouted at us to wait as she ran after us with her own attendant in tow. Our ragtag group had made its escape through the wide, beautiful main street away from the crowded port.

We had run quite the distance, and yet the hatted girl clearly hadn’t even broken a sweat, breathing still regular as she turned back around. This girl with the name I could not ignore was, in fact, giving me a wide, cheerful grin.

That was fun.

Those were the words that this girl had uttered upon having to make such a sudden escape.

“Let’s find some café or something to hide in for now,” my brother quickly interjected. That was a good idea.

“Let’s,” the hatted girl agreed. “Though it may have been a coincidence, it was lucky we also bumped into Reliared Silver here.”

“Hey, now you listen he— Mmmph!” Having still not realized who the hatted girl was, the red-haired girl tried to have a go at her, but before she could go any further, her attendant quickly covered her mouth to silence her. The girl herself may have been a little slow, but at least her attendant had realized.

Anyway, it would be safest to do as my brother suggested. After all, we had made a new friend that we couldn’t simply talk to out in the open like this.

At my brother’s direction, we entered an upscale tea shop along the main street. The last time I was here, my grandfather had bought me some expensive leaves. Given both its price tags and its aesthetic, the target market for such a place was aristocrats and traders, so they had tables for customers to taste different teas, sweets to pair with the brews, and even individual booths.

Upon seeing my brother and the hatted girl, the elderly gentleman manning the store let us through to one of the booths without protest. The man wasn’t physically strong, but I could tell that he wasn’t someone I should underestimate.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the girl removed her hat, letting down her beautiful flowing hair, blonde as honey, that shimmered in the light with her strange red-green eyes.

“Ah.” The red-haired girl let out a sound at the sight. She had finally realized who this girl was.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Hildetaura Altoire,” the girl boldly declared with a wide smile.

As I thought. So this was Hildetaura, the popular magivision star of the royal capital’s broadcasting station.

“First, Nia Liston, allow me to apologize for my sudden appearance.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I am Nia Liston.”

She wasn't someone I could be careless with my words around, so I chose to overlook her apology and go straight to introducing myself. I personally wasn't all that fussed about what impression I left, but it wasn't my intention to make things worse for my parents or Neal.

“And you, Reliared Silver.”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

“I wanted to talk with you, as well. Thank you kindly for joining us.”

I had thought to myself that she looked and sounded familiar, but that was what it was—she was a member of the Silver family. I had visited the Silver territories with my parents and the production crew when the Silver family started their own broadcasting station. I believe I had met with the oldest daughter at that time. Thinking back, she and Reliared did look alike.

“Let us have a seat for now. What I wish to discuss will not take us long.”

It wasn't hard to surmise that given who exactly was gathered, this was about magivision.

I couldn't see any reason to avoid the discussion, so I sat in the beautifully crafted antique chair that Hildetaura motioned towards. My brother was already seated, so I couldn't do anything that would make him look bad. And the strangely aggressive red-haired girl, Reliared, had suddenly become as meek as a lamb the second she'd learned Hildetaura's identity.

Actually, no, it didn't seem like her attitude shift was due to the princess alone. From the way she was sending glances Neal's way, unfortunately for her, it appeared that she had also been charmed by his beauty.

“Allow me to cut straight to the point,” Hildetaura said, smile still on her face. “I am putting every ounce of effort into the popularization of the monarchy's magivision within the capital.”

Right. Well, claiming it as the monarchy's aside, I was also invested in the

spread of magivision. Though the technology was less than a year old, I imagined the Silvers felt the same way. Actually, it felt to me that they were the most gung ho about the whole matter.

“Ever since airships became commonplace, a large shadow has been cast over the privileges of the ruling class. Perhaps you are aware of the story of the former Sky Empire of Mythgalis. Through a string of successful invasions, they claimed a whole thirty percent of the world as their own. World domination had been right at the fingertips of that prosperous country. And yet, there was a historical mass exodus of their common people upon the creation of airships. This event led to their natural decline. It shocked the rulers of the world. The citizens are the lifeblood of one’s country, after all. A small loss is already dangerous, but the more blood one’s body loses, the duller its movements become, until gradually it can no longer move at all. It becomes a matter of life or death,” Hildetaura explained, speaking with the precision and authority one would expect from a princess.

She continued, “Ever since that technological shift, the common people around the world realized that they had a method of escape from the confinement of the floating islands, and so they began to run from the oppression and heavy taxation set upon them by their rulers. Though this is a bit of a simplification, that is why the upper classes have more recently lost much of their power. No country was spared from this trend of their citizens making their leave. Though, all of this happened many, many years before we were born, so to us, it is normal to view commoners as more akin to ourselves.”

Really? As I had no memories of my past life, I couldn’t say whether or not the world I lived in had been that way. In fact, what era had I even lived through? I had a feeling I was from a time when that Sky Empire still existed... But nothing was clear to me, so there was no point in dwelling on it.

“Should this continue, the authority wielded by the royalty and aristocrats will continue to decline until these systems are no longer deemed necessary for the running of the country. My goal is to maintain my authority as a ruler of the kingdom and to restore our former glory.”

Well, it would be hard to ignore for a member of the royalty, especially given her father was the king. She probably wanted to do all she could to support

him.

“Those who control magivision control the world. That is what I personally believe.” Deep within that unwavering smile, I could see Hildetaura’s true side. “First, I will spread magivision through the land. Then, I intend to get other countries involved. Following that, we will become able to manipulate information and influence ideologies through magivision. This way the Kingdom of Altoire, as the ones in control of this system, will have the world in their grasp... This, along with the restoration of the authority of the throne, is my ambitious dream.”

Ambitious was right. Have the world in her grasp? Such a desire was well beyond a child. I liked it.

“Essentially, you want *us* to get involved with this?” I asked.

Hildetaura nodded without hesitation. She was serious.

“There is only so much I can do alone. But if I get at least one or even two more allies, my abilities will increase, and we can even begin to see a synergy with our work. Neal Liston may not be interested, but we three are already making waves in magivision despite being children. The more magivision spreads, the more people will gain prominence in the industry. It could be someone with real power or just a simple commoner. Perhaps even a big merchant with such influence they could affect the whole country, perhaps someone from a different country entirely, perhaps a famous adventurer. For the development of magivision, we require many collaborators, those with ambition, and even rivals. Presently, we are far ahead of everyone else. If we form a collaborative relationship, we may become the ones driving the latecomers forward.”

This girl was greatly ambitious herself—not bad at all.

“Uhh, so...I don’t really get all the complicated stuff,” Reliared finally spoke up, clearly confused after silently listening to Hildetaura’s nonsense. “But if you want to make magivision more popular, then I’ll cooperate, I guess...” Reliared may not have fully understood Hildetaura’s words, but she hadn’t mistaken the heart of the matter. This whole rubbish about information manipulation in order to influence ideologies wasn’t something that could be done until

magivision was much more popular, anyway.

First, we just need to think about working together in order to contribute to the spread of magivision. That was all Hildetaura's current goal was. In which case, I saw no reason to refuse. The reason Neal wasn't saying anything either was likely because he agreed with the princess's current agenda.

"I don't mind either," I said. I had little choice given I still had to earn much more money to prevent the fall of the Liston family. I was more than happy to contribute to something that would give me more work.

Still, for being a child, this Hildetaura was considering some very complicated matters. What had I been doing in my previous life when I was her age? For all I knew, I had just been a snot-nosed kid running around the fields with absolutely no experience of martial arts. That was usually what children were like, right?

Actually, it's not as if I'm thinking about much of the future even in this life.

Besides living as Nia's replacement, the only other things I thought about were how much I wanted to beat someone up, how much I wanted to take down monsters, and whether or not I could come up with a reason to justify acting in self-defense in a fight.

Power in this sense seemed to only cast a shadow over one's heart. Even though Hildetaura was still a child, being a member of royalty meant she had to consider different things than I did. On the other hand, perhaps there was someone manipulating her to think in such a way. That sort of troublesome background influence was not so rare. Honestly, I felt like her ideologies were way too developed for a child... Then again, maybe she was just a natural-born general with the foresight to see far into the future.

Whatever the case, who knew how long it would take to achieve her dream of having magivision spread through the whole world? Even just getting it to spread domestically was proving difficult. Was this really something we could achieve in our lifetime?

Regardless of the answer, even if our goal was hopelessly far, if our eyes were focused in the same direction, then there was no harm in us walking that path together.

At the very least, while our ideas aligned, that is.

“Apologies for the wait.”

Just as our conversation had found a stopping point, the elderly owner of the shop arrived with a pot of tea and buttered scones. It was almost time for lunch, so the smell instantly stimulated my appetite.

The tea that the gentleman poured by hand was quite good. It had a different scent than the precious tea I had received from my grandfather, but this was also wonderful.

The vivid red coloring and the gentle sweet scent coming from the tea implied high-quality tea leaves. This was likely Hildetaura’s favored brand. Though she was the third princess, a princess was still a princess. She was eating well.

The man left before anyone touched the refreshments, and then Hildetaura reached forward.

“That is true. Neither of you have a reason to refuse,” she said, taking a sip of her tea after continuing where we’d left off. “How do things appear to be going presently?” After having spoken about her ambitious dream, she moved on to a more grounded topic of discussion.

“I have heard of the Liston territories’ rate of popularization from Neal Liston. You have not managed to reach even ten percent of the population, yes?”

Oh, it was my turn to speak now—especially with the way she was looking directly at me.

“I have heard that is the case, but I’m not told all that much about the specifics,” I explained. I had heard in passing about a month ago that we had finally crossed eight percent, but I hadn’t even gotten direct confirmation of the facts for that one. I knew Bendelio brought his distinctive face to the Liston estate to discuss those sorts of topics with my parents, but I’d only heard bits and pieces.

They were still refusing to get me involved in the numbers. I *was* only six. I could understand why they wouldn’t want to be so direct about topics involving money, loans, or work guarantees. If I had my own child, it wasn’t exactly the

first thing I would want to talk to them about, especially the money part.

“Out of curiosity, how is the capital faring in this regard?” I fired back at her.

“I believe we have reached six percent. But the capital’s population is much larger, so the number of MagiPads sold should be higher than the Liston territories.”

That was true.

Hildetaura turned to Reliared this time. “How about the Silver territories? You only opened your broadcasting station six months ago, so I assume it is still fairly low.”

“Y-Yes, well, uh, um... Esuella, you explain!”

Reliared didn’t appear to be privy to those details either, and so she immediately turned to the tall attendant standing behind her. The only reason I knew the rough percentage for our territories was because I had heard it in passing, so Reliared probably knew about as much as me.

“I have heard we have not yet passed four percent. Thanks to the assistance of Lord Ornitt of the Liston territories, however, we appear to be progressing at a relatively fast pace.” The attendant supplied the information without hesitation, even including my father’s name.

Three percent in only half a year did seem to be on the faster side. I didn’t think the Liston territories had managed that even after a year.

“Then let us aim for each territory to increase that to ten percent over the next year.”

I was stunned into silence for a moment.

“Is that not impossible?” I asked my brother, who was sipping away at his tea and eating his scones as if he had nothing to do with what was going on. Given our difference in positions, I couldn’t refute the princess so directly.

I had heard that magivision was spreading at a fairly good pace right now. Everyone involved in this—me, Hildetaura, Reliared, and all the staff of the broadcasting stations—had put in effort that was now bearing fruit, enough that even those who used to have no idea what magivision was were at least

aware of its existence now. But managing to increase that to ten percent in a *year*? That sounded difficult. That would mean there would need to be one MagiPad per every ten households. MagiPads were still as expensive as always, and manastones weren't free. With that in mind, the financial burden just seemed like far too much for the common people. Having seemingly understood where I was coming from, my brother easily agreed.

"Yeah, I don't think it'll be possible with regular methods."

With *regular* methods? Aha.

"You mean there's a method that *isn't* regular."

Up until now, I had purely been thinking about using my appearances on magivision to increase the publicity surrounding MagiPads. Everything else would be handled by the adults, so I felt no need to dwell so much on it, but that was where the key lay.

"Exactly," Hildetaura said. It appeared she had been considering a plan to increase the spread of magivision beyond simply appearing on shows. *I haven't been considering it from that angle at all. Perhaps there is something there that can show the way.* Exactly what method had Hildetaura discovered though?

"Let us all consider a plan together!"

What...? She had walked into this with absolutely no plan of her own?

I was momentarily left in a daze at the words she so boldly declared. Who *wouldn't* think she at least had her own plan with how confidently she had just been talking? It was natural to assume that she had some sort of improper and evil taboo idea both revolutionary and devilish.

And yet, she apparently did not.

She didn't, huh?

I see. She had nothing.

Well, nothing we could really do about that. Though she may have had unreasonable ambitions, she was still only seven. A premonition from heaven would not descend to her so conveniently.

Still, there was no way we could come up with a good idea on the spot, so our

meeting was left there for the day. We idly chatted about other topics as we finished our tea and ate our scones, then left the shop. Afterwards, Neal and Hildetaura kindly guided Reliared and me to Altoire Elementary's campus.

It was located quite off the beaten path from the main street. We walked along what felt like an endless towering wall before we eventually made it to a large gate.

The front gate of Altoire Academy was wide open, and you could see children and their parents dotted about all over.

"I will be commuting from the castle, so this is where we must part ways. Let us meet again when the semester begins."

Hildetaura, who was in Neal's year, said her farewells before heading towards a carriage that was parked on the road that bordered the campus and climbing inside.

"Farewell." The princess waved from the window of the carriage as it slowly pulled out into the street.

Well, that's that whirlwind of a girl away.

The sudden descent of the princess the moment I arrived in the capital had utterly exhausted me. I would no doubt be forming a long and fruitful relationship with her so long as I remained part of the magivision scene. I did want to hurry up and get used to her, and more than anything, I wanted to hurry up and work out a strategy for taking over the industry. Time was limited, after all.

And that reminded me.

"Is your family doing okay?"

"Huh...? Why are you asking?" Reliared, after having seen off Hildetaura from beside me, had let out a small sigh. At my words, she turned a wary gaze in my direction.

For some reason, ever since we had first met, when she suddenly called my name at the port, I had felt some kind of animosity from her. Honestly, if she had an issue with me, I would much rather she just challenge me to a fight, but I

supposed it was a fool's errand to expect such a thing. It really was fine, though. In fact, I'd much rather she did. It was important she kept in mind that I would show no mercy in retaliating against even a child, though.

"I'm referring to the construction fees for the broadcasting station. It almost definitely took a large amount of money to build. It appeared to do quite the number to the Liston family's finances, so I wondered if your family was holding up all right."

"Huh?! Are you mocking the Silver family, an aristocrat family of the fifth class? Are you looking down on us?!"

"I was simply worrying for your financial situation— Ahem! Cough, cough! Mmnngh! Nnnnh! Mmm-mmm-nnngh! Quit it— Cough, cough!" Oh, no, no, this was not good at all. I almost definitely heard Lynokis click her tongue behind me. And a whole five or six times too! She was trying as hard as she could to make Reliared aware of her hostility towards her.

"Q-Quit what? I'm not doing anything," Reliared asked in confusion.

My attempts to cover them up had not been subtle, but it appeared to have done the job at least. Reliared was looking at me with suspicion, but so long as she hadn't detected my attendant's animosity, I deemed it a crisis averted.

Lynokis, don't challenge people so much weaker than you to a fight like that. Accept those challenges if you want, but don't propose them yourself!

"I'd been wondering the same thing, actually." I had no idea what Neal thought about all of Lynokis's animosity, but he came in with the save, anyway. "Talking in general terms here, it was tough for the Liston family's finances, and we're of the fourth class. We're not that far in class from the Silver family, so I don't imagine you had much more to spare than we did."

"Ah, um, y-yes..." What had been complete unadulterated animosity two seconds before immediately morphed into lovestruck innocence when faced with my brother. I could appreciate just how blatant her feelings were.

"Um...Esuella, what have you heard about our finances?"

Just like last time, Reliared's attendant answered without a pause: "Let's see, we've pledged various nearby floating islands as collateral and have received a

notable investment from your sister's business, but I do not know much more than that."

Given we were both aristocrats, I wasn't expecting to get to hear any details, but she gave more than I was expecting. Like, so much that I questioned if it was all right for her to say. She even spoke about using the islands as collateral. Even I made sure to be careful of what I said when it came to the Listons' financial situation.

"Then you are also in a hurry to establish a proper magivision industry in your own domain," I said.

"W-Well, yes, but..." Reliared suddenly drew close to me. Her strong gray eyes were staring right at me. "I will cooperate with you in order to save face in front of Her Highness, but I refuse to lose."

Excuse me? In what sense did she intend not to lose to me? Having said what she wanted to say, though, Reliared dashed off to the school.

"Allow me to apologize." Her attendant, who had stayed behind, bowed in apology. "The sight of you on magivision caused the young mistress to become rather fired up. Because she is around your age, she has ended up one-sidedly viewing you as a rival. She is quite the competitive girl."

So Reliared had meant she refused to lose as my rival in magivision. Certainly, a degree of competitiveness welled up at the sight of someone of similar age also being on magivision. So...it wasn't about martial arts? She didn't mean it as she wouldn't lose to me in a battle? She wasn't making a declaration that she would one day take me down with her fists?

"She may say some impudent things in the future, but it is entirely because of her competitive nature. She has no ill intentions, so I would appreciate it if you still treat her kindly. However, naturally, if she goes too far in any way, do let me know. I will deal with her appropriately myself, so please go easy on her."

I didn't mind if she remained the way she was so long as it didn't interfere with my work.

"You have it tough too, don't you?" I said.

"I truly thank you for the consideration. Now, if you'll excuse me." After

bowing deeply one last time, the attendant chased after Reliared with her luggage.

“Just who does that cocky little daughter of the Silver family think she is? Young Mistress, let us take her down!”

“Quit it.”

Don't whisper such violent notions into my ear, Lynokis. Even at recent magivision shoots, if something happened that she didn't like, she would immediately complain into my ear. Was this her own rebellious phase?

“Lady Reliared seems like she'll make a good friend for you, Nia.” Contrary to Lynokis's malicious words, my brother spoke with a nonchalant optimism. Did he know just what she was saying to me?

“You think so?”

Were Neal's words true? I didn't mind either way. Whether Reliared became my friend or not, though, Lynokis was ultimately the problem. I could only hope that she wouldn't mess anything up when I wasn't around.

“Surely you won't become friends with someone like that? I don't want you to.” She was back to whispering into my ear.

“I already told you to quit it,” I hissed back. I knew she only had good intentions, but she had to stop being so extreme about it. Not that I was especially one to talk.

Oh, how much I wished I could just punch and kick someone already.

Nia Liston

A battle-hungry hero whose spirit has been implanted in the body of a frail young girl who died of an illness. She thirsts for combat, and wishes to find someone strong who can take her down.

Age:

6 years old

Title/Occupation:

Daughter of the Liston family
(aristocrats of the fourth class);
magivision star

Favored fighting style:

“Nothing beats one’s fists.”

Past life’s purpose:

“To become stronger, to train, and
to fight someone stronger than me.”

“Shall I dumb it
down for you?
I’m challenging you
to a fight.”



Chapter 2: And So Begins a New School Life

“New students, please make your way to registration.”

An adult wearing an armband featuring the school’s crest was directing the large swathes of people gathered in front of the school gates. Lynokis and I were no doubt included.

“See you later, Nia. You’ll probably be busy with a lot of the entrance prep, so I’ll get going for now,” Neal said. Deciding to not intrude in all the unpacking and essential errands that I would need to do, Neal and Lynette headed off. *We’ll be living on the same island now, anyway. I can see my brother as much as I wish.*

After seeing Neal off, I headed towards the registration area that the various uniformed staff members were directing us to. I imagined Reliared was already there. Registration had been set up outside, perhaps because the weather was good. They had tables set up underneath some canopy tents to shade them from the sun.

All it took was signing my name and I was done. I received a little wooden tag to show that I had completed my registration.

“You’ll be staying in the aristocrat residence hall, so please head on over.”

Oh right, I’d heard that though aristocrats and commoners took classes together, we lived in entirely separate dorms.

Children of aristocratic families were allowed to have one servant accompany them, which was why I had Lynokis with me and why Neal had Lynette. Each child from a wealthy merchant or aristocrat family was given their own individual rooms and then a small neighboring room for their servant.

Altoire Academy’s campus was large, so large that the school building and dorms encompassed the middle and high schools as well as the elementary school. That said, there was enough of a distance between them that unless you went out of your way, it was unlikely you’d bump into students of a different

age group. The indoor and outdoor gyms and other special facilities were shared, but the teachers specifically scheduled classes so they wouldn't overlap.

We eventually made it to the elementary school's aristocrat dorm for girls. Upon entering, we were immediately greeted by a common room furnished with tables and chairs. There was apparently a separate cafeteria, so it wasn't the sort of place you would have a meal. Essentially, it was like a hotel lobby.

There were already various girl aristocrats gathered around something.

If I recalled correctly, I would attend school for six years. I was six years old right now, meaning I would be graduating after I turned twelve.

These six years for a child are both long and deeply significant.

I was still but a small girl right now, but by the time I left, both my face and body would look dramatically older. There would no doubt be some children by that point who would even physically be at an adult size.

Though, just being tall wasn't enough to become strong. It was an immovable truth that I was stronger than many who were simply big. I was both unrivaled and more intimidating. That was why something as trivial as an age difference meant close to nothing. A six-year difference? Why, that was simple child's play.

"Young Mistress, I believe that may be the manager of the dorm over there," Lynokis said, pointing at the single adult seated among a circle of children.

It was a young woman, looking at something with the girl aristocrats, unaware of our presence.

"Excuse me, are you the manager of this dorm?" I asked, walking up to her. Now that I was closer, I could see what they were doing: they were watching magivision. More specifically, they were watching an episode of *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation* that I had recorded last summer, where I learned how to catch bugs. This was a re-re-re-re-rebroadcast, I believed. It was unavoidable when we'd recorded so few episodes.

"What...? Huh?"

Both the children and manager were looking between me and the magivision in shock. It probably felt a little odd to them to be seeing me in two places at

once. I was actually starting to get a little embarrassed seeing the shows that I was a part of.

“Miss...Nia Liston?”

“Yes. I look forward to staying here.”

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

This shouldn’t come as a shock to either the children *or* the manager. I was a child of Altoire, after all, and education *was* compulsory at this age.

“Sh-She’s real! Sh-She’s really here!”

“Your hair really is white!”

“Oh my gosh, you’re so cute! You’re adorable!”

Right? Dear children, true cuteness has descended upon you. Though my brother was even more impressive when it came to good looks.

Seeing those reactions really made it sink in just how popular I was getting.

I gave the wooden tag to the manager—no, the head resident who managed the dorms, Carme, and was given a key in return.

“So you’re six now, Nia? Time sure flies by.”

Apparently, Carme had been watching me since the first episode of *Occupation Observation*. Around a year and a half had gone by since my first appearance on magivision. So much time had passed before I knew it. I found myself sharing in the head resident’s nostalgia.

Not only were we in the capital of Altoire, which was literally on royalty’s doorstep, but this was an educational institute to teach the next generation of children. So, given the spread of magivision was in the interest of the kingdom, MagiPads had been swiftly introduced into the educational system. Thanks to this, there were many at the school who had witnessed my recovery. Over a year had passed since I had taken revenge on that devil of illness for poor Nia. It had been a desperate fight.

“I believe I will be recording episodes while attending school. I may end up

causing much inconvenience, but I am in your care,” I said.

“Ah, yes, Her Highness Hildetaura has already informed me. Don’t be afraid to come ask if you need any help.”

So Hildetaura had already put a good word in. Well, the words of royalty would have far more weight than my own.

“Wait,” Carme said, eyes widening in realization, “that would mean that girl who came earlier was Relia, right?”

Apparently, the head resident had not immediately recognized Relia earlier. I had been appearing on magivision for over a year, while Relia had only half a year under her belt. That differing time would likely mean that society’s recognition of us would also be different.

Still, this head resident is quite strong. I can tell that she’s trained her body well. She might be the strongest person I’ve seen so far. Perhaps it is so she can fulfill her role as the guardian of us children.

Even then, though, I could beat her so easily that weeding the garden would take more effort. Just where oh where were the strong warriors?

My room in the dorm was neither big nor small.

“Our life with just the two of us together begins today, Young Mistress.”

“Indeed it does.”

“You could also say that our cohabitation begins today.”

“Why change the wording?”

“How about we sleep in the same bed together?”

“This is entirely unnecessary. Please get the luggage unpacked.”

I began sorting through all the luggage we had brought from the Liston estate with Lynokis while we chatted about topics that honestly brought me close to asking her what the hell she was on about.

Well, at least the space was big enough for me to practice my forms. Maybe a bit too narrow to do any sparring, though. I was quite happy that I had my own

bath and toilet, at least—*especially* the bath. A manastone was required, but I could draw hot water at any time. That meant I could train whenever I wished.

When I told Lynokis she was welcome to use my bath, she thanked me. “I hadn’t realized that the aristocrats’ dorms had personal baths. I spent my time at school in the commoner dorms, so I had to use a shared bath. What would you like to do now? Sleep together?”

“Did I not say I wanted to shop for any essentials I needed? I need to procure my uniform, as well.”

I had brought plenty of changes of clothes with me, but any smaller bits and pieces, I decided to wait to buy until I was in the capital. My uniform was also currently waiting to be collected from the tailor. I believed I then had to go for a physical exam after noon. I could go for the exam any day before the new semester started, but I wanted to get that over with too.

I could relax once I had done everything I needed to do.

“Daily necessities? If you don’t have specific brands you like, the school’s store should have pretty much everything you’d need.”

We took a short break after we’d finished unpacking, but as we went down to the first floor lobby to go shopping, we bumped into Carme. I took that opportunity to ask her where I could get any essentials for school and for the dorm.

It may have been wrong to say that we bumped into her, given that she had to remain in an easily accessible location so that she could guide the new students as required.

“The school has its own store?” If the shop was under the school, then that would mean any stationery or supplies they carried would be approved by them. That would be more than perfect for me, then. I didn’t care about getting the most expensive kind nor did I care about the design, and I also wanted to avoid unnecessary expenditures. The school uniform was already extortionate, and I would have to have a new one tailored every year.

There wasn’t anything that explicitly said I *had* to get a new uniform every

year, but apparently it was an aristocratic status symbol. Rich families *did* love to show off. I didn't care all that much about acting like an aristocrat, but in the interest of not ruining my family's reputation, I at least wanted to try and mimic what the other aristocrats were doing. I had nothing I was all that particular about, so it wasn't much skin off my back.

"Then there is not much need to stray far from the school," I said. In any case, if I could acquire all the bare necessities from the school's store, then the only reason I would have to leave the campus would be to acquire my school uniform.

The tailor had requested that I go to their shop directly so I could try on the uniform and make sure it fit, so I had no choice but to go, however troublesome I found it. If they were willing to just send it as it was, I could have had Lynokis go fetch it or have a deliveryman drop it off.

Just as I was thinking over if there was any possibility I could avoid going, I bumped into her again.

"Hello, stranger."

"Ah, Nia."

Given we were both new students and had arrived at roughly the same time, it was no surprise I ended up meeting Reliared Silver and her blazing red hair again. She looked a little unhappy to see me, but—perhaps because she had gotten the opportunity to get out what she wanted to say to me—her largely unnecessary hostility had decreased. That, or she had been warned about it by her attendant.

"Are you shopping, as well?" I asked.

"Yes. I need to go collect my uniform."

That meant we were both after the same thing. Maybe our tailors were the same too. It wasn't as if there were many stores that specialized in clothing in the capital.

"Our production crew came, as well."

Her what?

“Your...production crew?”

“Yes. Apparently, they want to broadcast me in my new uniform.”

A shoot focused on the first time wearing a school uniform, hm? I hadn't even considered that. In fact, given I hadn't been told to do something like this by my parents, Bendelio, or even any of the younger directors, I doubt any of them had considered it either.

We shouldn't overlook big life events or festivals like this. We've already proved that even a small appearance on magivision can have a large effect.

“Young Mistress, I do not believe we can pass up this chance,” Lynokis whispered into my ear.

“Yes, I know.” She didn't need to tell me twice.

This was almost certainly a great opportunity. If I appeared on magivision now, it would increase my reputation and would help appeal to students, new and current alike. Magivision was well-known among the nobles, but it was still an unknown for the commoners, and appearing on the Silver Channel could only bring positive attention.

“May I also make an appearance?”

“Huh? You? Why?”

Now that was one hell of an unhappy face if I'd ever seen one. She was so sulky for a child.

“We're going to be working together to increase the spread of magivision, no? If we make an early show of what good friends we are, it'll make things easier.”

“But we aren't friends.”

She was right; we weren't.

“We'll be getting closer from here on, though, won't we? It'll be fine.”

“I really don't think we will be! Wait, why are you grabbing my hand?! Let g— Why are you so strong?!”

“Let us be off. If we hold hands, we'll seem closer. It'll hurt if you try to

resist.”

“OW OW OW OW OW OW! Okay, I get it, so stop twisting my wrist! My poor wrist!”

That was an agreement, yes? Then let us head out.

The Liston Company’s production crew wasn’t in the capital right now, but if the Silver Company’s crew recorded it, it would ultimately end up getting broadcast in the Liston territories. So long as the viewers were willing to watch other channels, of course. The Liston Channel alone still ended up with a lot of rebroadcasts, so I was sure there would be many people who would see it eventually.

And so I somehow managed to turn picking up my new uniform into a whole event.

The head resident saw us off from the dorm, complimenting what good friends we were. Reliared made sure to shout back that we weren’t. What useless retaliation. We were walking down the street hand in hand; No one could say we weren’t friends. Not that I would care if they did.

Our destination was the tailor we had ordered our uniforms from. I could just ask Reliared on the way where the production crew was. If we happened to have different tailors, I would just force them to keep recording. I would *not* let this chance pass me by.

I refused to let go of Reliared’s hand, but I turned when her personal attendant, who had no choice but to trail behind us, spoke up. “Um, Lady Nia, may I have a word?”

“Yes?” I nearly added, “Is there a problem?” But there was no point in me getting unnecessarily aggressive. That said, even though she was supposed to be Reliared’s bodyguard, she was making absolutely no attempt to save her. Then again, maybe she understood that this wasn’t something worth making a fuss about.

“If you would like, have you considered asking your elder brother to come join you? It is a bit late to ask your parents to come all the way to the capital, but it

makes a bigger impact when you have a relative with you for such a personal moment.”

Now this was a suggestion worth considering.

It was true that the presence of my brother would likely make a big difference. If I had a relative present, I would be able to frame my entrance into the academy with pretty words—and receive my family’s blessing, while being watched over by my loved ones.

The issue was...it was *Neal* we were talking about.

“Y-Yeah, go call the young master. Aren’t you both—”

“What?”

“Ow ow ow ow! Let go of my hand for a second! I won’t run, I swear!”

“What was it you were about to say about my brother?”

“Like I said, let go of me first— Wait, you aren’t letting go?! You don’t intend to let go at all, do you?! Ngh, why are you so strong? Ugh, fine, whatever. Stop twisting my wrist, though. I don’t want to cry right before a recording...”

The pain was eventually enough to make Reliared quiet down. I did feel a little guilty about nearly making a child cry, but I still didn’t intend to let her go.

Anyway, back to Neal.

“Aren’t you two on bad terms? Ever since you appeared on magivision to, you know...announce that you’d gotten better, he hasn’t appeared even once, right? Isn’t it because you hate each other so much you don’t want to perform together? Or...I guess not, since he was there to pick you up from the port.”

I personally didn’t think our relationship was that bad. The real reason we didn’t perform together was because my brother had acquired some rather extreme fans, so he had been distancing himself from magivision as much as he could. It was also the case that he had school to contend with, but it was very much Neal’s own desire to not appear on magivision again.

Incidentally, those problematic fan letters had decreased in frequency now that over a year had passed, down to a trickle of one or two letters at a time. At least, as far as I was aware.

“Neal would rather not appear on magivision. However...”

This time, I refused to listen to my brother’s wishes. This was all for the sake of magivision and the Liston family. Being the eldest son, it was Neal’s duty to work with me on this. He was the only relative I could easily call to the area, so I would need him to appear on the episode.

“Lynokis, I will go with Reliared to the tailor. You fetch Neal for us.”

“Understood.”

“Absolutely bring him here, no matter what,” I whispered. “You understand what I’m trying to say, yes?”

“Of course. All for the sake of the young mistress. No, for the Liston family.”

Seeing the solidarity between master and servant, Reliared watched us with an indescribable look of disgruntlement. My treatment of Lynokis was as such only because she was not just my attendant but also my apprentice.

And so, the proof of the harmonious relationship between the Silvers and the Listons was successfully recorded and aired—a recording featuring Nia Liston cheerfully wearing her new uniform with Reliared Silver. Nia Liston’s brother and two of Reliared’s older sisters watched over them with full support. Viewers could see the daughters of their territory lords preparing to start school together as their families looked on fondly.

I couldn’t vouch for the Silver territories, but I later found out that it made waves in the Liston territories. According to Carme, it was received much better than expected because it felt like a progress update after I had been bedridden. My brother also began receiving an influx of fan letters again, which made him want to avoid magivision even more, but that was a story for later.

“Come have lunch with us.”

After we had finished trying on our uniforms and the recording had gone smoothly, Reliared was going to go have a meal with her sisters while they were here. She invited me to go along with them.

Though we pretended we were closer than we actually were during the

recording, in reality we had only just met earlier that day. Given I had forced my way into her recording, I didn't feel like I could refuse.

"I'm gonna head back..." my brother sighed. He had also made sure to act cheerful during the shoot, but he'd actually been quite upset since we dragged him here, so the moment he didn't have to keep up the facade, he immediately returned to being dejected.

Neal really wanted to avoid appearing on magivision again at all costs. His extreme fear of his fan letters seemed like it was going to flare up again. In fact, it almost certainly would. But there was nothing else for it; he was the eldest son of the family, after all. Even if he had no intentions of appearing on magivision now, the requirement would absolutely come in the future.

And so, my brother returned to the dorms, but I went with Reliared and her sisters for lunch.

The Silver sisters brought me to an upscale restaurant, but we didn't receive an individual booth; we were just seated at a regular table. We let Lynokis and Reliared's attendant have some time to themselves and told them to have lunch elsewhere. Lynokis seemed reluctant to leave, but I made her go. We really needed to spend more time apart.

I turned my attention to the Silver sisters seated around the table. You could tell from their striking red hair that the three of them were related. I was yet to meet the second daughter, but I would likely get that opportunity in the future.

"This is a little delayed, but it's nice to see you again, Nia."

"Yes, it is a pleasure to meet with you again."

I had met the eldest daughter at the opening of the Silver Broadcasting Company. Her name was Raffinee, I believed—Raffinee Silver. She appeared to be in her midtwenties. As expected of a mature lady, she was skilled at makeup, her chest had grown well, and she was very stylish. She was the ideal image of an aristocrat, including the side of her that appeared very straightforward.

This was my first time meeting the third daughter, though. While Raffinee had the air of an adult woman, what made her sister stand out was how slender she

was. Seeing her alongside her sisters made it apparent that she also had very strong features, making her look a little like a young boy.

“My name is Ririmi Silver. I’ll be starting my third year at the middle school. It’s nice to meet you.”

“A pleasure to meet you. I’m Nia Liston.”

I observed Ririmi as I responded to her introduction. *Hm, as I thought, this girl has developed her body for hand-to-hand combat. The balance of her muscle, fat, and core is very good.*

I could tell that she wasn’t overdoing it, but she hadn’t slacked in her training either. Knowing your limits was an essential part of training. Unfortunately, though, she was still fundamentally quite weak. Lynokis a year ago would still be stronger than her.

“Ririmi is really strong, you know,” Reliared boasted. “She was the runner-up in last year’s middle school division of the martial arts tournament.”

“Huh?!” *Like this? At this strength? Were the tournament’s standards so low?!*

“Surprised, aren’t you?” Reliared said, face smug. Technically I *was* surprised, just maybe not in the way she meant, so I wasn’t lying when I nodded. Reliared continued, “She’s a student of the Heavenstriker school, and I also started learning it last year.”

Ah... That was a familiar name, indeed.

“Is this Heavenstriker style truly... No, never mind.”

Is this Heavenstriker style truly strong? was what I nearly said, but I couldn’t say something so rude right to her face. Practitioners of martial arts had their own pride in their art, but they also had proper etiquette. Even I couldn’t say something so impolite while in her company.

In my year of recording for magivision, I had sometimes heard about this Heavenstriker style. It was apparently famous as a weaponless style and had many students, and many of its practitioners were strong warriors. Quite frankly, I was ecstatic at the thought of challenging a student of the style. The more I heard about it, the more I wanted nothing more than to just jump right

into a spar.

But.

No matter how many students of the school I met, not a single one of them was strong. Was it because they themselves were weak, or was it because the style was weak?

I had heard it got its name from how its “great founder’s” fists would rumble like thunder that could pierce the heavens. If the founder had reached the same precipice that I had, then there was no way they could be weak.

Though I felt like I had gotten even further than that, admittedly.

These fists of the Heavenstriker were likely Chi Fist: Rumbling Thunder. But for as flashy as that skill was, its power wasn’t anything to write home about. It was one of those techniques that was nice as a party trick and not much else.

My interest in the Heavenstriker style had already dwindled. Even if it was deemed an important martial arts style, if it was weak then I had no interest.

“Why don’t you give it a try? You seem strong,” Reliared said.

“I am fine, thank you. I have no need to attend.”

Even if I met with more practitioners, I kept meeting weaklings, and it only added to my disappointment. It would be for the best if I didn’t hold any expectations.

“Ah, that reminds me,” Ririmi said. “The standin instructor should be participating in this year’s physical exams.”

Hm? Who’s that?

Ririmi continued, noticing my interest, “It’s because a lot of the students of the dojo will be there. There’s clubs from elementary through high school.”

Clubs? Wait, that wasn’t what I was curious about.

“If they’re an instructor, are they strong?” I asked. There was no way an instructor could be weak.

“Of course. Even I couldn’t hope to stand up to hi— Ngh.”

Oh my.

“Excuse me.”

The café had been rowdy a moment ago, but it went quiet all at once. I may have been letting too much of my chi escape in my excitement and ended up putting unneeded pressure on her.

I see. So an instructor of this string of disappointments was within reach. Then perhaps it was a bit too soon to write off this style completely.

“Just what kind of person is Lady Nia?”

The personal attendants were having their lunch at a café within view of the restaurant where their charges were eating. The pair were sitting at a window seat, remaining alert while they had their meal.

Nia Liston’s personal attendant, Lynokis, and Reliared Silver’s personal attendant—Esuella Blankett.

She was a tall woman who had been assigned to be Reliared Silver’s attendant earlier this year. The Blanketts were an aristocratic family of the eighth class, but compared to those three girls, she was practically a commoner.

After graduating from the middle school of Altoire Academy, she had been ordered by her father to work for the Silvers, given their families were acquainted. That was five years ago. Back then, she had been the one who had taught the third daughter of the Silver family the Heavenstriker style after becoming infatuated with the style herself while at the academy. And now, she was teaching Reliared.

In other words, she was the master to both the third and youngest daughters of the family she served.

“May I ask what exactly you mean by that?”

Given they were both representatives of aristocratic households, a careless blunder could besmirch the name of the family they served. What appeared to be simple idle chatter could result in the leaking of valuable information. Though they had just happened to end up having a meal together, it was clear that neither could let their guard down. As such, they were both cautious of each other.

In the past, the Silver and Liston families had been closer, but the previous lord of the Liston territories had retired early, resulting in decreased communication between the two. Their relationship had dwindled to letters of seasonal greetings and not much more. Due to their recent interactions concerning their magivision broadcasting stations, however, their communication had once more increased. It was only thanks to that collaboration that Nia Liston had been able to impulsively participate in the recording of a show originally intended for the Silver Channel.

Regardless of their intentions, had their families been on bad terms, the sudden inclusion would likely not have been approved. In the worst-case scenario, the Listons would have had to compensate the Silvers for interfering with their work.

“That girl is strong, is she not? And to a shocking degree.” Esuella suddenly brought up the topic after they had ordered and were waiting for the arrival of their meal. “Were you the one who trained her?”

Nia Liston was six years old. Naturally, Esuella did not think she was naturally so strong, however true that may have been. That was why she assumed that the situation was the same as it had been with the Silver girls, with Lynokis being Nia’s master. Nia was strong, but so was Lynokis. *I’m sure this attendant could make for quite the battle*, Esuella thought to herself. Of course she wouldn’t think that such a young child would be stronger than Lynokis, even though the reality was that Nia was Lynokis’s teacher right now.

“Well, I wouldn’t say you are so far from the truth.” Lynokis figured that giving an actual explanation would cause issues, and even if she told the truth, she doubted Esuella would believe her, so she did what she could to dance around the topic. “I’m rather curious about Lady Reliared myself. She appears to be viewing the young mistress as a rival.”

“Yes. After seeing Lady Nia on magivision, she appears to have become greatly fixated.”

“Fixated on Nia?”

“She would always say things like ‘I’m cuter’ and ‘I could do better than her.’”

“What?”

“Those are her words, not mine. But...” Esuella’s face remained calm, even at Lynokis’s threatening tone. “I must say that I agree with her.”

Lynokis could not know with what purpose Esuella had said such a thing, but it absolutely whipped up a storm within her heart.

“*Excuse me?* The young mistress is a hundred times cuter than that impudent redhead.”

“I imagine to you, yes. To you. But what does society think?”

“Your idea of society is surely warped. Is a red-haired stray dog that bites at strangers ‘cute’?”

“Lady Nia is only six years old, and yet she is so uncannily composed. Is that not quite creepy? She comes across more like an old lady than a child. Is she *really* a young girl?”

Unaware that those sitting at the tables around them were beginning to back away, the two attendants continued staring at each other. They would absolutely not glare. They must remain calm. But they would not avert their gazes either.

They did have one thought in common: *I will definitely one day prove to you that my young mistress is cuter.*

The attendants finished their meals after their conversation had abruptly halted, and then remained silent as they left the shop and returned to the restaurant where their respective young mistresses were waiting.

They returned just as the girls were eating dessert, and Raffinee had started her sales talk, telling Nia that she would love to have her wear her clothes. Nia was still unaware as she’d never watched the Silver Channel, but Reliared’s fashion sense was garnering much attention. She was cute, trendy, and someone whose style was worth copying.

No one would say to Nia directly, but every time Raffinee saw Nia on magivision, she would always mutter about how ugly she looked, that her clothes were atrocious, and that she could make her shine way more on the screen.

Nia quite frequently wore plain dresses that didn't make her stand out too much, or she would wear whatever work clothes were prepared for her. It was the formal attire of the Liston family's daughter. Rather than ugly, it was more that she was being dressed in the traditional and typical attire of an aristocrat's daughter, so it would definitely look boring to anyone involved in the fashion scene.

"Young Mistress, if you have finished your meal..." Lynokis whispered into Nia's ear. Though it was left unspoken, it was clear that she was prompting her to leave.

"I have been asked to accompany them shopping, so I will be unable to attend the physical examination today," Nia replied.

"Is...that so?"

Though the relationship between the attendants may have been strained, there was no need for the young mistresses to also have a strained relationship. In fact, if they really did end up fighting, then the last thing the attendants would be doing was fighting among themselves.

The young girls had only just met today, and though Reliared had appeared hostile at first, they were getting along rather well now. At this rate, unless something big happened, it appeared unlikely that they would end up fighting in the future.

This was fine.

This...was fine.

Lynokis glanced up, and her eyes met with Esuella's. A meaningful silence extended between them, their gazes telling all they needed to say.

I will definitely one day beat into you that my young mistress is cuter and more wonderful.

The entrance ceremony was only a few days away—a signal that my school life would soon officially begin. But before that, there were various things I still had to do—namely, cleaning my school uniform, receiving my textbooks, and procuring other essential supplies and daily necessities.

Textbooks were precious items borrowed from the school itself. Apparently, they'd reprimand you for so much as handling them a bit too roughly. Naturally, losing them meant you had to pay for a replacement, and the school would later do whatever they could to find them again.

The books weren't strictly secured or anything, but I imagined the school didn't want the texts passing to other countries either, given they were whole collections of information.

Children who didn't live in the capital stayed in the dorms, and since Altoire Academy took in students from all over the kingdom, only a small handful of the students were actually local. Probably only about ten percent of the students commuted; there weren't that many of them at all.

"Let's go, Nia."

"Yes, yes."

That girl was as lively as ever. After I'd somehow managed to reconcile with Reliared Silver, we decided we would walk together today. Both of our attendants were still escorting us for now, given their presence was allowed on campus until the new semester started. Personally, I would've been fine by myself, but Lynokis would've been all huffy if I didn't take her, so I had little choice.

Though the early spring air was still somewhat cool, both Reliared and I were wearing T-shirts and shorts—outfits that did very little to protect from the cold.

There was only one reason for our attire: we were going to take our physical examinations.

Reliared was wearing an outfit that had been custom-made for her, but I was just wearing simple gym clothes I had bought from the school store. We were at the stage of our lives where our bodies would grow in no time at all, so I was content with this given I would likely have to get new ones again next year.

The closer we got to the field, the more children I saw wearing the same clothes as me. We joined the steadily growing flow of people.

There were three kinds of gazes aimed at us. First were the normal gazes of

those who were simply looking at us as new classmates. Second were the curious gazes of those who recognized Nia Liston and Reliared Silver, the magivision stars. Third were the anxious gazes of those who saw our personal attendants and instantly knew we were aristocrats.

No matter how little significance the class system held nowadays, we were still a group that many did not want to get involved with or accidentally get into a fight with publicly. Regardless, it wasn't something I paid much mind to. It wasn't as if anyone was watching us with the intent to kill.

When we arrived at the field, the children were being split into groups for the examinations.

"After you write your name, do a circle of the track from the right side and return back here again, all right?"

We went to the registration that was nothing more than tables set up outside, received a form from the staff there, and wrote our names at the top. There were blank lines below for our results. Given how everything was split up, the spaces would likely get filled in as we went to each station.

After we received our forms, our attendants immediately took them from us—not wanting their young mistresses to have to carry even just a slip of paper was probably part of their creeds as personal attendants. Nonetheless, we all headed in the direction the staff member had pointed.

The first station took our height and weight measurements.

"I'm taller, but you're heavier, Nia. But you're not fat or anything. In fact, you're thinner than me."

Now that, dear Reliared, is a difference in muscle. Muscle is heavier than fat, after all.

Next was a strength test to see how much weight we could hold.

"Young Mistress, you must not show your full strength here," Lynokis quietly warned.

"I'm aware." There was no need for her to remind me. If I were to give it my all, I could very easily pass the average threshold for an adult. I already stood

out being on magivision; I would much rather not stand out for the wrong reasons on top of that.

Not that there was anything wrong with standing out, but there was a time and place for everything. Any scrutiny garnered outside of those times could end up as negative attention. I would only increase the risk of giving a bad impression.

Well, at the very least, I had a regular six-year-old girl in front of me whom I could use as reference. I just needed to mimic however strong Reliared was.

After the strength test were short-distance and long-distance running endurance tests.

“Haa, haa... Why are you always a teeny bit better than me in basically everything?”

Because I refused to lose to even a child. I never walked into any of these tests thinking that I wanted to win; I would always think to myself I would let myself lose at the last second, and yet right at the end, that refusal to lose would just hit me.

At the end of the day, I'm still a martial artist at my roots. We're naturally sore losers, so do forgive me.

The final test finally shed some light on something that I had been curious about.

“Last is the magic aptitude test, huh. All of us girls from the Silver family have been red.”

The last test would be to roughly measure the amount of mana within one's body and its type. The red that Reliared mentioned was the identifying color that signaled someone had talent in fire magic.

All humans had mana within their bodies—and apparently, animals and monsters did too. In fact, magivision was a technology that had to be turned on and off with one's mana. Despite that, though, one's mana quality did not have as much importance placed on it. This wasn't a period of war, after all. That said, those with high quantities of mana or mana of an uncommon color were the exceptions. That appeared to come in handy when it came to searching for

a job. But that really was a very rare exception.

Everyone was born with mana, but not everyone could use magic. There were also things people were better or worse at depending on their mana capacity. But overall, the ways magic could be used were quite limited in this day and age. That was just the kind of era we were in now.

Altoire was so blithely peaceful that the kingdom was nicknamed “The Peace-Loving Kingdom” by other nations. There weren’t many in this country who wanted power for self-defense.

After waiting in one of the many lines, Reliared, currently standing in front of me, was told by the young lady at the desk to touch a crystal.

“Okay, your mana color is red.”

She had gotten red, just as she had said she would.

It seemed that the method to test one’s aptitude was simply a case of touching the crystal on the table.

“So I’m red, after all. What about the amount?”

“Let’s see... You have a good bit more than average.”

Wow, so Reliared might be able to use magic.

“Next, please.”

And then my turn came around.

“O-Oh my...”

I had been starting to get the feeling that it may have been the case, but now that I’d touched the crystal I was certain that...

“There’s no color at all.”

It was as I surmised. No matter how much I touched the crystal, even if I rubbed my hand all over it, the crystal refused to change color. Ordinarily, the center of the crystal should have reflected the color of my mana. But I had already assumed this would be the outcome.

“My hair has not regained its original color since I almost died over a year ago.” It was likely that my mana receptors had been destroyed in some way.

When magicians used too much magic, their hair would turn white. Could that not have been what was happening to my—no, to Nia’s body? Desperately fighting against her disease, Nia had been using all the energy and mana she could muster to try and stay alive. Ever since I had begun noticing that my hair color was not returning to normal, that was the thought that had constantly permeated my mind.

During my first recording, the makeup artist had commented on my hair color, and my father had worried over what to do about it. There was no doubt this was the reason for it. I no longer had an identifying color like everyone else. In a sense, this was an aftereffect of having almost died.

But so what? I didn’t think I had even been able to use magic in my past life, so I didn’t find myself particularly caring whether or not I could use it in this one. What use was it learning to use magic this late in the game (of course, ignoring that I was technically still six years old)?

Thankfully, I could still use enough mana to turn on the magivision. So long as I could do that, that was more than enough for me. I cared naught about my mana aptitude. Physically attacking enemies was much faster than using magic, anyway, so this was perfect for me.

Besides, this was the proof of how hard Nia Liston had fought to stay alive. They were scars, a mark of honor. So there was absolutely no reason at all for me to feel inferior for it.

“I’ve never heard of someone not having an identifying color before.”

After finishing the last test, all we had left to do was submit the form to registration.

“I’m completely clueless on magic. Is it really so rare?” Given I had no interest in magic, I only knew the basics. Reliared having the aptitude for it made it seem like she probably knew about more of the details—not that I really cared.

“Yes. Whether someone can use magic really depends on the person, but everyone has an identifying color. People often say that it represents who you are.”

“Hmm, really.”

“Why do you sound so disinterested?”

“Anyway, shall we get going?”

“What do you mean ‘anyway’? You were the one who asked, so try listening to me! Wait, where are you going?”

“To your sister. She’s waiting for us.”

“Oh right, she did arrange that with you, didn’t she?”

It was something I had honestly been really looking forward to since we decided on it. I felt like my hopes would be dashed if I kept my expectations too high, but I couldn’t help it. I was finally going to meet the instructor of the Heavenstriker style.

When I had lunch with the Silver sisters yesterday, I had spoken with Ririmi about going to check out her club. “I’ll be waiting for you,” she had said, so I assumed she would be there.

“We’re having a club fair over in the gym today, so go give it a look if you’re interested,” the person at the desk mentioned when we handed in our examination records. Though it felt like quite the coincidence, that was probably what they were told to say to everyone.

“Hey, Nia.” Since her sister would be there, Reliared decided to tag along. “Are you going to join the Heavenstriker club?”

Nope.

It was very clear that my style and the Heavenstriker style were completely different, so I didn’t see any point in studying under them. There was nothing they could teach me. What was there even for me to learn from those weaker? I didn’t want to hear that rubbish that there was plenty to learn from those more inexperienced than you. I’d already learned from those weaker than me so I was beyond that by now. At least, I believed I had. Not that I had any memory of it.

Well, really, there was a completely different reason I wouldn’t be joining.

“It’s not because I don’t feel like it but more my position right now. I don’t think I have time to dedicate to a club.”

“Well, yeah, I guess so... I really want to join, though.”

Both Reliared and I had to carry on the work of magivision. Third Princess Hildetaura had already promised that she would boost the magivision market with us, so there was no way we could halt our own appearances just because school had started. And as another very real problem, I had the massive hurdle of the Liston family’s financial troubles to think about as well. I couldn’t back out now just because I was living in the dorms.

“Do you want to become strong, Relia?” I asked her.

“Of course! I want to become stronger than you.”

“What? Stronger than *me*?”

“I’m confident that I beat you in looks and personality, but I definitely lose to you in strength. As a daughter of the Silver family, I don’t want to lose to you in anything.”

“Ha ha ha...”

“Why are you laughing?”

“Hee hee hee hee. No, it’s nothing...pfft, snrk... You want to get stronger than me? Really?”

“No, seriously, why are you laughing?!”

It was because it made me happy, even knowing she couldn’t beat me right now. I wasn’t trying to make fun of her nor was I looking down on her. I truly wished that she would one day manage to surpass me.

“Why are you sneering like that?! I definitely won’t lose, y’hear?!”

Please, I very much do not want you to lose.

Now that the era of war had ended and the invention of airships had made the world feel smaller, the value of combat was limited to fighting the monsters that were still the enemies of humanity and dangerous work such as island or

dungeon exploration.

Neal had been putting much time into his swordsmanship, and the academy even had classes for self-defense. Those who wanted to learn how to fight outside of class in a way that was much more focused and deeper in training would join a club. Naturally, there were still literary clubs and ones for more casual hobbies, but the ones gathered in the gym for this fair were the much more intense sports clubs.

And yet despite that, I'd heard that the younger generation didn't really seek power in this kingdom of peace. I could *really* feel the changing of the times.

Inside the large wood-floor gym, there were plenty of new students as well as both adults and current students introducing their clubs and trying to recruit new members.

Upon seeing the number of students, I started to believe that the idea that the young generation was less interested in martial arts was actually a lie.

"Swordsmanship, magic, axe wielding, archery, spearmanship...hm?" Taking a quick survey of the fair, it appeared that each club had its own specialty weapon.

"Ah, I think that's the Heavenstriker style over there," Reliared said, pointing over to a booth where there were many adults wearing blue dogi, holding no weapons.

"I'll be back in a moment."

"Wait, I'm coming too. Ririmi's gonna be there."

With feelings of anticipation rushing through my chest, we headed for their booth and were instantly spotted by Ririmi. "Ah, Nia!" She came over and didn't hesitate to pull me into the ring of dogi-wearing martial artists.

Talk about forceful. You don't need to rush so much; if you want to have a little spar, I'll spar any time.

"This is the girl! The prospective member I talked about!"

Wait...

"Hm... I see."

Something that Ririmi had said didn't sound right, but before I could process it, a large man came and stood in front of me. There were many gathered here, both adult and child alike, but this man was particularly large in build and bulging with muscles. With his body built like a rock, he had to be the instructor.

Given his beard, he must have been over thirty. There was no way he was a student of the academy. From what I could tell, he wasn't weak, but he wasn't all that strong either. He was the kind to take advantage of his natural build. Rather than working on his technique, his main strength was his muscles. His balance as a martial artist was bad. As he was, he was just an average person who relied on brute force.

Still, he wasn't weak. He was blessed with a good build, and he definitely appeared to have talent in the martial arts. But I could still beat him easily while reading over my scripts. He amounted to nothing more than that.

If I could praise him for anything, it would be that even if I punched him with all my strength, he'd be able to withstand it. That body, those muscles, they weren't for show. The hit would probably still injure him, though.

"Is this the strong one you spoke about?"

Around the instructor, there were also others in dogi looking at me with doubtful eyes. A lot of them looked like they had potential. Wonderful.

But that didn't change that the instructor was weak. Even if these kids had potential, with him as their teacher, they wouldn't go far.

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Nia Liston."

For now, I would at least introduce myself. I wasn't sure what would happen, but I at least wanted to be able to beat up a few of them. *As revenge for how much they've disappointed me. The Heavenstriker school really is such a disappointment.*

I felt like Ririmi had perhaps misunderstood something. I had no idea what she had said to them, but the moment I was able to assess the instructor, I had done what I'd come here to do.

As I had thought, I had come here only to be disappointed. Good grief. If this was all I was going to get, I'd rather just leave and go get something nice to eat with Lynokis. My body could have probably handled a heavy steak at that point, but even something other than meat would have been nice. Though it wasn't very classy, a commoner meal I could chow down on sounded great too.

And then, once we had had our meal, we could train intensely for the first time in a while. Neither myself nor Lynokis had had the time to train as much as we had hoped we could.

Given my approaching entrance ceremony, we had quickly knocked out the recording for a lot of the planned episodes, which left some days open specifically for preparing for my school life. Since I was already in the dorms, I couldn't go all that far away, but the capital was huge. I was sure there were still plenty of interesting things I had yet to see.

Now, with that decided, let us be off.

Honestly, I did want to spar with some of them right here, right now, but even I was able to determine when such things were appropriate. As a martial artist, I knew how to show respect to another of my kind.

Even if they were weak, I didn't want to do anything that would one-sidedly destroy their pride. Beat the master down in front of not just a crowd but also his students? Slap him silly until he was bawling? Mock him while dodging each of his strikes until his spirit broke? I would never deign to do something of the sort. I had already decided I wouldn't do anything like that ever again.

I...did have a feeling I'd done something like that in my previous life, but I could at least refrain from doing it in this one.

A master wanted to show off in front of their students. They would never wish to show their vulnerable side, even if it was something they allowed themselves to do in private. If this master were beaten up by a six-year-old, he'd have no leg to stand on anymore. There was no way I could go that far.

"Then I will take my leave here." I made my introduction, but I would say no more than that. I never intended to join them after all.

"Hey now, at least wait a bit. There's no need for you to rush, surely."

I had even tried to leave amicably, and yet here was the instructor trying to stop me.

“How about it?” The towering rock’s voice floated down towards me. “Have any interest in the Heavenstriker style? We’d love for you to join.”

Right now, I was being solicited to join the club by a man several times my height while surrounded by several of his students. I knew it wasn’t his intention to intimidate me, but it absolutely appeared that way.

I had been intending to show respect, but it was clear that this man would not show the same courtesy in turn. *What a pain. Maybe I should just take him down. Who cares that he’s in front of his students?* Just as I thought that to myself...

“Unfortunately, I am already teaching the young mistress. She cannot enter any other school.”

At the most perfect time, in came Lynokis. Though it was likely to protect the instructor rather than me. I was glad she understood.

“Yes, that is exactly right. I already have a master.”

We had already agreed on this as our explanation long beforehand. I was being trained in martial arts by my personal attendant, so it was natural that I was strong. Though, in reality, it was the opposite, and I was the one training Lynokis.

“Oh, of course. Lynokis, have a match with him and show him your strength.”

“What?”

All that would await was a pitiful and tragic end were I to spar with any of them, but Lynokis shouldn’t pose a problem. She wasn’t yet in her twenties, but she was still an adult.

I turned to the instructor. “If you prove yourself to be stronger than her, then I’ll reconsider. I only want to train under someone strong.”

“But, Young Mistress, that’s—”

“I’m okay with it,” the instructor said. Though Lynokis clearly looked unhappy, the large man had a daring smile on his face, as if he agreed with my words. “As

the young mistress says, only the strong can lead the students of martial arts.”

It was true that there was nothing more pointless than a weak martial artist. What he said was valid, but just being strong wasn’t enough. If you thought that all you needed to become a true martial artist was strength, you still had a long way to go.

“Seriously...?” Lynokis muttered pitifully, clearly wondering if she truly had to do this. I gestured for her to lend me an ear. The attendant knelt down next to me. “Yes, Young Mistress?”

“I’ll be watching how you use your chi. Show me just how much you’ve polished your martial arts this past year. If you win, then as a reward, we can go eat whatever you’d like.”

“I-I see... What if I lose?”

“Strict training for a whole day. You love that, don’t you?”

“I absolutely do not. So losing means I get shoved back into that hell again...”

Wow, she loved it so much that she was trembling in anticipation at the thought! It was clear that as her master, I definitely needed to meet her expectations.

Let’s do it again in the near future regardless of the result.

“It is the student’s job to take the vanguard. Now go.”

When he saw that we had finished our discussion, the instructor immediately began outlining the rules.

First was to create the arena. It was simply a case of having the students form a ring around the club’s allocated space at the fair, but as narrow as it was, it did mean we had a space secured that no one would accidentally walk into. The club members then notified attendees that there was about to be a match between two different martial arts schools and called those who were still on the fence about joining the Heavenstriker club to watch.

There was quite the number of students coming by to see. The club members must have garnered a fair bit of interest.

“Yo, see you’ve got something fun going on here.”

“You bet. Just watch, the Heavenstriker school is going to take so many of the students this year.”

Some adults carrying swords and spears came over and began chatting with the instructor.

I see what’s going on here now. The reason the instructor so desperately wanted me to join was because he wanted as many students as possible. I was a magivision star, so by recruiting me, the club could use my fame to boost their popularity.

“Wait, huh? Wh-What’s going on?!” Upon seeing the crowds of people flooding towards us, Reliared frantically made her way over to us. She had been outside the circle where we had challenged the instructor, so she may have missed the events that inspired the fight.

“My attendant and that instructor are going to fight over me.”

“What?! Over *you*?! Why is this like one of those stories where two guys duel over a girl?!”

“Where two guys...what? I don’t know what you’re on about, but sorry for being popular.”

“H-Huh?! HUH?! I COULDN’T CARE A SINGLE BIT!”

Really? Good, because I didn’t care either.

“Want to go out to eat once they’re done here?” I decided to ask.

“What? Uh, sure, but is your attendant really gonna be okay?” Reliared was looking over at Lynokis with a frown. The sight before her was a young woman of average build facing against a massive man built like a brick. With that alone, the natural response would be that, judging from their difference in build, the result was obvious.

“She’ll be fine. Lynokis is strong.”

She was my student. If she couldn’t win against someone of this level by now, then I’d failed. As far as I was concerned, though, there was no way she would lose. I could predict the result without even seeing the conclusion. For the

amateurs who were purely basing it on something as surface level as their size difference, though, this was no doubt a riveting sight.

A good number of onlookers, including Reliared and myself, surrounded the two to watch, including who had quite naturally flowed to the front of the circle.

“That girl is strong. Likely stronger than that man,” I heard Esuella say.

The absolute contrast in size appeared to have driven Reliared into severe worry. Worried enough to ask her own attendant what she thought about the matchup. However, the tall woman stated her opinion with such calmness it completely allayed any worries the little girl had. She had the same view as myself.

“R-Really? Well, if you say so, Esuella, then I’ll believe you.”

“See? What did I say?” I said.

“Esuella’s still stronger, though!”

Hmm, Lynokis and Esuella could probably put up a good fight against each other, but I couldn’t be completely sure which of the two would win. Reliared’s attendant very likely knew what chi was. Or at the very least, she was trained enough in martial arts that she could manipulate it if taught how. That was how good she was.

And that was exactly why she did not doubt Lynokis’s victory.

The instructor’s body was trained in a way that did not even consider using the power of chi. If he were aware, there would be no reason for him to put so much emphasis on his muscle density. On the other hand though, were he to learn how to use chi, he might actually become quite the monster. That was fun to consider in its own way. It was a thought for a different time, though.

“Then let us pit them against each other sometime in the near future,” I proposed.

I may be rather short-tempered. It appeared that someone else finding fault with my student lit a different kind of anger inside of me. If regular anger went to my head, anger when it came to matters pertaining to my student or those

around me went to my stomach.

Why the hell would I sit down and just accept that? Why would I stand by and simply swallow such an insult?

“Huh? You wanna go? Esuella will win, you know?” Reliared’s face was so smug, and yet she wasn’t even trying to be malicious. She truly completely believed in the victory of her own attendant and Lynokis’s loss. Oh, how infuriating a face it was.

“Really now? Then consider this a deal.”

You may wonder what point there was in me getting so serious with a child, but it was just *different* when it came to my own student. I could handle back talk about myself, but my student was different. She was like...a precious plant that I had grown by myself—a bonsai of sorts.

I had taken this bonsai under my care and put in so much work to carefully, so carefully, help it grow. How could I *not* get mad at those mocking it? Who cared that it was just a child saying such words? I would not let her get away with it.

Everyone around us was getting excited at the match between the girl and the large man in front of them, but as someone who knew the outcome, I was getting excited for a different reason.

There was a simple explanation of the rules before the battle began.

They were not to make the match too extreme. Given there were children watching, the last thing they wanted to do was show them any shocking scenes like blood spurting everywhere, or limbs breaking at horrific angles, or adults crying and screaming, so they would play it on the safer side.

All that said, such guidelines were hard rules for the instructor, but only guidelines for Lynokis.

I could understand their reasoning at least. Seeing such a size difference, they probably felt it wouldn’t give such a good impression were they to carry out this fight as if they were at equal strength. The instructor could be labeled a merciless devil, a petty man using his all against a young woman. If that happened, then what was supposed to be an exhibition match to attract

students would push them away instead.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for the instructor given I was aware of their actual difference in strength, but the man himself had decided those rules, so we couldn't really do anything about it.

The dogi-wearing young boy who was to act as referee stood between the two and raised his hand.

The children's voices quieted down all at once.

The air grew thick with the tension of a match about to begin.

Lynokis took up her stance, as did the instructor.

And then...

"Begin!"

The boy lowered his hand with his call.

Slap!

And just like that, it ended.

A sound like two hands slapping together reverberated through the gym.

"Wonderful."

That was great. Her speed was quite good. The foundations were still a bit shaky, but she used her chi well.

The instructor hadn't moved an inch since he readied himself, but before he knew it, Lynokis was right in front of him. Lynokis relaxed her posture, bowed, and then, ignoring the overbearing silence that hung in the gym, returned to my side.

"I have completed the task."

"I can see that. You did well."

There was no blood spurting everywhere, there were no limbs broken at horrific angles, and there were no adults crying or screaming. Something more dramatic would have appeased the crowds more, but with that rule set in place, this was more than fine. Go too far and the kids would never want to join.

There was no need to show to her next opponent what tricks she had up her sleeve, after all.

“Huh...? What...?”

“It was a low kick. She fired out her right leg just like a whip,” the tall attendant explained to the confused Reliared. Many in the audience were confused as well, but those who knew, knew.

“It was an intense kick right into his thigh. Given the sound, his muscles were likely relaxed. It probably hurts quite a bit—enough that he can’t move.”

Looking back, the instructor had yet to move from his position, but his face was positively dripping with sweat. He may not have quite felt it at the moment the kick landed, but it was simply a delay in the pain.

“Then let us go have lunch as we planned. Relia, it is time we depart,” I said, turning away from the ring.

“Huh? Huh? Wha...?”

“What would you like to eat, Lynokis?”

“I would like your handmade food, Young Mistress.”

“I see, so you’d like to eat at a restaurant, yes? Since we’re in the capital, we may as well go to the Chocolate Lily’s Aroma. I’d like to give my greetings to the chef.”

“Um, no, I said I’d like you—”

“Relia? I said it is time we depart.”

“Huh? Huh...?!”

And after that eventful club fair, the entrance ceremony arrived.

“Aaaaaand cut! That was great!”

On the day of the ceremony, the capital’s broadcasting company was present. Or more precisely, Hildetaura had brought them. They were going to do a recording for a program in which the enormously popular third princess would welcome the new students to the academy.

It would be the first time Reliared, Hildetaura, and I would record together. Not the most relevant observation, but this was also the first time I had seen a woman as the director of a production crew. The Liston territories didn't have any female directors. But honestly, it wasn't really that important.

First, the three of us were recorded having an enjoyable chat in front of the school gates. Next, we relaxed with some tea in Reliared's room, and then Hildetaura performed a tune with some sort of string instrument as celebration for our entry. Finally, Hildetaura dragged the two of us on a tour of the school building.

There were still many children who were unaware of magivision, so no doubt the point of this was also to introduce them to the culture.

The recording itself was absolute chaos. We would continue regardless of who was in the shot, and there were always regular students around us. Cocky show-offs would jump into frame, curious ones would follow us around, and those who wanted a chance to see the princess would gather and end up getting in the way of the camera. In any case, our recording certainly caused a commotion.

I was pretty sure there were incidents here and there that the production crew of the Liston territories would have stopped recording for, but for this, we continued, no matter what.

The next day, the recording was broadcast.

The start of the recording was fine, but the footage from the tour of the school was an absolute mess. Was it really okay to broadcast such scattered footage? It was all over the place, with absolutely no organization to it. It was quite literally chaos itself.

But children who had just entered school being so irresponsibly carefree was a touching sight in its own way. Surely, this was fine.

And that was how my school life at Altoire Academy began.

Lynokis Funk

An attendant personally assigned to Nia. Having served Nia since she fell ill, she has very strong motherly feelings towards the girl. Her words can be questionable, but she means well.

Age:

18 years old

Title/Occupation:

Nia's personal attendant

Favored fighting style:

"Originally trained in swordsmanship, but now uses a weaponless style after becoming the apprentice of the young mistress."

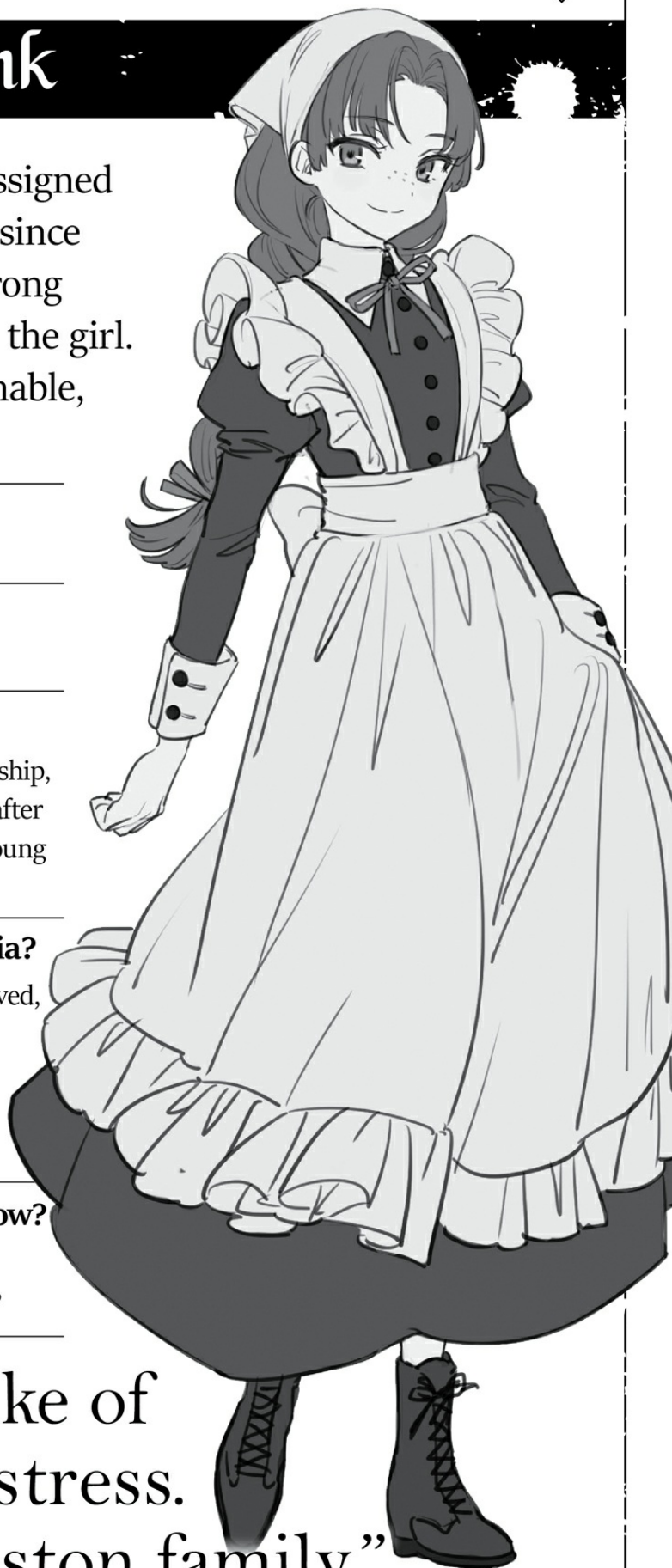
What are your thoughts on Nia?

"Ever since Nia's condition improved, my physical contact with her has decreased. I really want to get up close and personal with Nia. I really want to."

What do you want most right now?

"Nia's handmade cooking.
I will pay as much as it requires."

"All for the sake of
the young mistress.
No, for the Liston family."



Chapter 3: The Inaugural Meeting for Project Magivision

“We shall now commence the first meeting for Project Magivision,” Hildetaura confidently proclaimed to the room, the relaxed air immediately becoming much more tense as everyone focused.

The tea party ended here, turning instead into a serious discussion.

“Allow me to say this first: Nia, Relia, both of you should start calling me Hilde. You need not address me as ‘Your Highness,’ nor do you need to speak to me with any formality. There may be times in public where that will prove a little difficult, but if we do not see ourselves as equals, then we will not be able to comfortably express any opposing opinions. Please do not feel the need to hesitate to say what you wish to say. A meeting in which we dance around our issues is a waste of time. The noble prestige that comes with royalty and aristocracy has become nothing more than arbitrary, so there is no need for us to care about our status anymore, correct?”

If she insisted, then I would not hesitate to do as she wished.

“No, I could never speak to Your Highness so crudely,” Relia implored.

“This formality is the kind of thing that Hilde was saying is a waste of time. Right, Hilde?”

“Precisely.”

Relia’s flustered reaction was no doubt what was expected of an aristocrat, but I couldn’t afford to be troubled by it. Time was exceedingly precious for me, after all. I had to do whatever I could as soon as possible to increase the popularity of magivision for the sake of the Liston family’s finances.

On the third day since my school life began, with the hype surrounding the sudden broadcast of the entrance ceremony still in the air, Hildetaura had asked to meet. Since she commuted to school from the castle, she had no room in the dorms, and mine only had the bare necessities—it wasn’t the most

attractive place to have a meeting.

Reliared's room, meanwhile, was the perfect example of a wealthy girl's bedroom. She had decorations hanging from her walls and a vase full of fresh flowers, giving her room a much more fabulous aesthetic than mine. This would no doubt be more comfortable for Hildetaura than my own barren space. That was also the reason I had thought it better to record us in Relia's room over mine on the day of the ceremony.

And so, we were here now after school, just as planned.

After we enjoyed the cakes and tea that Hildetaura had brought with her, we began our discussion.

Hildetaura continued. "First, we are unable to get involved with any magivision business that requires specialist knowledge. Partly because I am not terribly informed on much of the system's inner workings, and partly because I am forbidden from giving my thoughts on any areas that involve large investments."

That felt like a given. Though she was a princess, Hildetaura was still only eight years old. Why would she have anything to do with parts of the business that they had hired specialists for? The amount of money they would be handling would be massive—certainly more than a child's allowance.

"Um, what exactly do you mean by things that require specialist knowledge, Your Highness...?" Reliared was clearly struggling to drop the formalities in front of the third princess, but she would get used to it in due time.

"Hmm... All right, consider the MagiPads on which we view magivision."

MagiPads, of course, were the crystal tablets that would float in the air.

"When inventors first began developing them, they experimented with the uses of natural crystals. The more they did so, the more their techniques evolved, and they were eventually able to create crystals with magic. However, that does not change the fact that the crystals still require resources to create. Even just one takes an incredible amount of time and money. The MagiPads sell for a very high price, yes? There is actually a reason for that."

I had heard that the current cost of just one MagiPad was enough for an

entire commoner family to live a life of comfort for several years.

“Now allow me to go over a little of magivision’s history: Once it became possible to make MagiPads with human hands, it then became necessary to start up magivision projects. Originally, magivision was seen as a form of transmission available only to royalty, the aristocracy, or the wealthy, but due to a certain trailblazer of the field, the industry had a new mission to make the technology available to all across the land,” Hildetaura said, sure she had our attention.

“Natural crystals were a finite resource, but now that we can make them with magic, rarity is no longer an issue. It was announced to the upper classes and the wealthy that the long-term plan was to gradually spread this technology far and wide. However, research and development would require money, so much that even a whole country’s assets might struggle to fund it.”

“When the plan was announced, the country asked if anyone was willing to be a joint investor for the project. The Liston family raised their hands immediately, but after that, no one else followed. A few years have passed since then, and now the Silver family has also stepped forward to invest as well.”

Interesting. Well, history aside...

“The first thing I can think of is trying to lower costs,” I said.

If the cost of a MagiPad could feed a family for years, then no matter how trivial the cost was to the wealthy, it was far too expensive. It went counter to our desire to appeal to the common people. Even if they wanted to buy one, they couldn’t. And if someone managed to buy a MagiPad solely because they felt compelled to, they’d never be able to make ends meet.

Hildetaura nodded in agreement. “The cost is definitely an issue. Though they’re actually cheaper than when they initially launched...”

That was the *cheaper* price? No wonder MagiPads hadn’t spread yet.

“May I ask— Uh, h-how...are they made?” Reliared asked, stumbling through an attempt at being casual. *Do your best. You can do it.*

“That is all top secret. Even I don’t have access to that information.”

“I-Is that so? I see.”

That would mean we wouldn't be able to do anything relating to the development of the MagiPads themselves. It was less because we were too young to be involved and more that, as outsiders, we shouldn't be meddling with something we had no knowledge in. The method of making MagiPads was likely top secret so that it didn't leak to other countries.

I thought it best that we remained out of the loop. It was possible that there would be those who would try to get the information out of us at any cost. If I were interrogated directly, I could handle it, but I didn't want the people around me getting mixed up in anything.

It didn't take long before our discussion came to a standstill. The cost of MagiPads felt like the part that needed the most work, but so long as its creation process was a state secret, we had no choice but to give up on it.

So what was next? What else was there?

“Oh, right,” Reliared suddenly spoke up, after a silence so long that our tea had cooled. “Our channel has been dealing in a lot of pictures about adventurers.”

I'd heard. And I had much interest in them, but my parents still refused to give me permission to watch, so I hadn't had the opportunity to see any. *Just let me see bloodshed already.*

“I have heard— I've heard that adventurers get their income by finding resources or gathering materials from monsters during their explorations,” Reliared explained. “They say that if they're lucky enough, they could make an absolute fortune.”

Income, hm? Certainly, earning the money to then buy MagiPads for the population was a direction we could take. Had we the money, it would have proved a quick and easy solution. Though whether Reliared's suggestion was the right way to go about it, I couldn't say.

Technically, I could easily earn the money by hunting monsters myself, but...

But I was six years old. Taking down city gangsters was one thing, but hunting

monsters out in broad daylight would no doubt make me stand out in a way I wanted to avoid.

“I believe that would be difficult to use as a reliable source of income. An adventurer’s work comes in waves. They cannot guarantee they will be able to get rewards regularly and the amount they receive would likely not suffice for our needs,” Hildetaura said.

That was true. We could maybe finance one or two MagiPads that way, but not a whole country’s worth. If we found an ore vein somewhere, then perhaps we could increase those numbers, but that was a rare occurrence. And the problem with hunting monsters was that the more monster materials were on the market, the less valuable they became.

This...is proving very difficult. If this problem could be solved with my fists, then I would have known exactly how to deal with it, but I wasn’t the best at using my brain.

“May I speak?” Just as silence had fallen over us once again, Reliared’s personal attendant, currently acting as our waitress, spoke up.

“Yes, go ahead.” Hildetaura nodded without hesitation. If we kept going like this, this whole meeting would have been a waste of time, after all.

“There are tales of a renowned adventurer whose talents and achievements were so famous that he was able to gain an aristocrat as a sponsor. Essentially, he was able to get someone to financially support his expeditions.”

Hmm.

“In other words,” Esuella continued, “if we are fully able to display magivision’s financial potential, we would be able to gain support and investments from all manner of people and perhaps even receive more work in the process. I believe that if we wish for magivision to spread, we must first increase magivision’s popularity and reputation itself.”

Uh...huh?

“I see.” Hildetaura appeared to understand, but I was still a little lost. Reliared’s face was very serious, but it appeared that she was only halfway to understanding, the same as me. Seeing Reliared’s and my matching confusion,

Hildetaura chuckled to herself. Our cluelessness was no doubt spelled out clear as day through our faces.

“The selling point of magivision, naturally, is broadcasting moving pictures,” Hildetaura began to kindly explain. “So if we were to broadcast more fun and interesting programs—pleasant programs, informative programs that people would want to see—we would gain further support from them. That is essentially what your attendant is trying to say.”

Okay, I could understand that.

“But wait, does that mean the programs we’ve been showing up to this point are no good?” I asked.

“Not entirely, but is there not a program with something *more* that we could record? Something more thought-provoking, something more eye-catching. Rather than trying to do something just to stand out, perhaps we should think of a more direct and aggressive approach.”

Just as I wanted to see adventurers, island explorations, and battles to the death with monsters, many viewers had their own things that they desperately wanted to see—so why not broadcast pictures like those? That was what she meant.

It wasn’t that we were *ignoring* demand when choosing what to record, but her point was to go even further with it, most likely.

“So, the question is what kind of programs would have the most demand, right? I wonder.”

Reliared crossed her arms in thought, and Lynokis, standing behind me, came to whisper in my ear.

“Young Mistress, ‘love.’”

Love?

Lynokis elaborated. “What the people have interest in is those of the opposite sex—in other words, romance. Humans desire other humans. When you consider that stories of love and hate have been abundant since time immemorial, and that they continue to increase even to the present day, you

can tell that humans—whether through instinct or reason or some other carnal need—desire other humans. In fact, that was exactly what your very first stage play depicted. To put it bluntly, if there is romance, anything works.”

Could she not have just said that out loud rather than leaving me to communicate such a long-winded explanation? But she had a point. So long as it wasn’t convoluted and tedious, even *I* enjoyed a good romance.

“How about a love story?” I said, using Lynokis’s idea.

“Oh my.”

“Oh, but love stories are so *boring*.”

Summarizing what Lynokis had said to me—there was no need for me to go on for as long as she did—Hildetaura seemed very agreeable to the idea, but Reliared looked much more unhappy with it.

“Really, Reliared? Love stories have been popular with people for such a long time, though. Actually, Nia, was your first stage play not also a love story?”

Oh right, I remembered my grandfather had told me that Hildetaura had come personally to watch the final showing of *The Girl Who Fell in Love*.

“You came to see the final performance, didn’t you? Thank you very much for your patronage.”

“It was very polished. A wonderful performance.”

I was glad that she liked it then.

“But aren’t love stories annoying to watch? Adults are meant to be mature and yet these stories always have them keep wasting time, and beating around the bush, and getting all fidgety. You’re a grown-up, just say what you feel already!”

See? Reliared was on exactly the same page as me. I understood more than I wished I did. She was exactly right. Why was an *adult* being all “Oh, but I can’t just *tell* them, hee hee!” about it? *Don’t be like that. You just make me want to punch you.*

But Hildetaura’s eyes twinkled. “Adults are adults because they have so many circumstances to consider that they cannot just decide on the spot. Are you

listening? An adult's love begins as tickling embers, but when those embers touch and burst into a flame, they burn everything."

Why was she talking like that was obvious?

"Relia, I don't understand that eight-year-old."

"Right? She may be royalty but even I don't get what she's talking about. She's acting like some love expert, but I bet she hasn't even had her first love."

"Who cares! I can still analyze romance! Why are you both like this?!"

Hildetaura pretending to be an expert aside...

"I do think it is true that there are a lot of people who care about love stories. Maybe not children, but at least adults." Beyond their personal feelings, neither Hildetaura nor Reliared denied that fact. Going by what was stated earlier, there was one thing in particular we could focus on. "In other words, if we wanted to create a romance that would garner a large audience...we should go for the naughtier kind."

"What?! Nia?!" Reliared was looking at me like I had grown two heads.

"Wait a moment, Nia! J-Just *how* naughty are you thinking here? Just how naughty?!"

"How naughty? Hmm..." Shouldn't that be obvious? "Naked?"

"Naked?!"

"Full nudity?" I clarified.

"Full nudity?!"

"A man and a woman getting tangled up in bed—"

"Stop! That's way too far!"

Oh my, really? Reliared didn't seem to like the thought of it, but Hildetaura's reaction was especially extreme. And yet she had been acting like a master of romance just two seconds ago.

"If we air something like that on magivision, aristocrats from all over will boycott us until the industry completely falls apart! This is still a high-cost, low-return project! We cannot give them a reason to cry for our cancellation

because we are corrupting our younger generation!”

Well, even I could admit that would be troublesome.

Hildetaura rushed to change the subject. “Let us put aside the idea of a love story for now! What else is there?!”

What else? That really was a difficult question.

“Nia, you are forbidden from saying anything about n-nudity or—or bodies getting all tangled, okay?!”

“But you’re interested, aren’t you? Wouldn’t you love to see it?”

“Absolutely not!”

So we couldn’t do anything directly related to the MagiPads themselves. Whether trying to cut costs or anything else, it would require us learning about country secrets. And now romance wasn’t allowed either. As things were, we didn’t have a notable source of income nor did we have the support of the citizens, so we couldn’t do anything that would completely ruin the image of the magivision industry. As such, my pitch for naked relations between a man and a woman had been shut down immediately.

Actually...

“Perhaps something like this would be best discussed alongside the staff at the broadcasting stations,” I suggested. Given how informed they were on the workings of magivision, they could confirm or deny what was possible for us. Naturally, they would have slightly more developed morals than us children, so they would best be able to decide whether or not such naked adult encounters could be approved or not.

“You make a good point,” Hildetaura said. “They are constantly considering what they should record, after all. They are likely many steps ahead of us on that front.”

Exactly. I was fairly sure that whatever we had thought of, they had already considered.

“Mmm... I think unless we think up a *really* good idea, we should just leave the programming to them? Maybe?” Reliared, still struggling to completely

drop the formality, had come to the same conclusion.

“And back to square one...” Hildetaura sighed, realizing when we had run out of ideas once more. “Before I met the two of you, I had run through many possibilities in my head. However, I never quite came up with anything that felt like a winning idea. How do we increase magivision’s popularity, and how do we get it to sell? Even adults have not found the solution to this problem. It is a fool’s errand to believe that we could, but...it really does not sit right with me.”

“Your High— Miss...Hilde.” Reliared’s eyebrows scrunched together with pity upon realizing how deeply Hildetaura had been worrying about this topic. It wasn’t an impersonal matter for me either, so I definitely felt the frustration that Hildetaura did.

What exactly should one do at moments like that? Ah...there *was* one thing we hadn’t tried.

“If we find ourselves stuck at an impasse, then how about we turn our thinking around?”

Just remaining here dejected wouldn’t get us anywhere. There was no point in thinking about whether or not our ideas were actually useful. For now, we just needed to spit out whatever came to mind.

“Right now, we’re thinking about this from the perspective of those who perform. ‘What can we do?’ That is our current approach. But how about we think of it from the opposite side? For example, what kind of programs would the *viewers* like to appear in?”

“What the *viewers* would like to appear in?”

Yes, that was something that I had thought of when we did our impromptu recording of the entrance ceremony, that crazy mess of a school tour.

“Many children wound up broadcast as a part of that entrance ceremony program. There were those who deliberately stood in front of us and those who chose to tag along. In other words, many of those children had thought in that moment that they wished to appear on magivision.” I was simply saying whatever came to mind, unsure where it would actually lead.

“That’s it!” Hildetaura was the one who found an answer in my ramblings. “An all-new type of magivision program where the audience gets to participate!” Her eyes opened wide as she slammed her hands on the table and stood. “If the common people learn that they, too, can appear on magivision, they will become far more interested! A program that they don’t just watch but also participate in! Nia, Relia, this is it!” Hildetaura seemed to be in her own world as she got all excited and then suddenly went flying out of the room with a bang.

Um... Did she... Did she go home...?

None of us knew how to respond to the girl’s sudden departure. Was that what it meant to be rendered speechless?

“Lynokis, please at least watch over her until she enters her carriage.”

“Yes, Young Mistress.”

I decided to have Lynokis guard Hildetaura for at least a short distance, just in case. Hildetaura didn’t live in the dorms, so she commuted by carriage every day. I couldn’t imagine there being any danger within the campus grounds, but given she was a princess, we would be in trouble if anything happened to her.

“That caught me by surprise.”

“Same here.”

Reliared couldn’t help but let out her honest thoughts after Lynokis had left the room.

Hildetaura must have been thinking much more seriously about how to promote magivision than I had originally thought. Though it was a personal issue for me as well, even I hadn’t thought about it as much as she had.

As proof of that, the girl immediately ran off to put an idea into motion once we’d found one she thought was viable. Personally, I thought we could have sat and spoken about it a little more first, especially given I hadn’t said everything I wanted to say yet.

Hildetaura had put a definitive end to the meeting, but I had thought of

something more when the princess mentioned the idea of a program that the audience could participate in.

“Relia, do you have a casino in your territories?”

“A casino? I’ve heard rumors that we have illegal underground casinos, but that’s all.”

So they weren’t public.

“When Hilde mentioned doing a program with audience participation, my very first thought was gambling.”

“Gambling?”

“Or some kind of competition, perhaps. I’m sure you remember what happened the other day at the club fair. The moment a match was about to happen, everyone gathered to watch.”

“That’s true.”

“Now imagine we had a program in which adventurers were pitted against beasts, or strong warriors fought against each other. How does that sound?”

“What? That sounds great.”

Right? I wanted to see something like that too. Actually, just watching wasn’t enough; I wanted to participate.

“But a lot of people have been saying they don’t want to see any blood. Apparently, if we air anything too graphic, we get a lot of complaints.”

Was she serious?!

“But how can you get excited without bloodshed?! What else is there going to be during a tournament?! People dying just comes with the territory!”

“HUH?! Who said anything about people dying?! That’s just scary!”

“What do you mean?! Haven’t there been adventurers dying every day on the Silver Channel? Blood spurting everywhere? Limbs all torn apart?!”

“Where did you hear that from?! Of course that isn’t happening!”

I-It wasn’t...?

What a disappointment.

The Silver Channel was even more of a disappointment than the Heavenstriker style.

“Why do you look so disappointed?! Why do your thoughts naturally get so extreme?!”

You know what, I didn’t care anymore. For so long I had wanted to be granted permission to see what was on the Silver Channel, and yet it turned out it was all peaceful! Who would want to see something so boring? Show me bloodshed!

I was well and truly fed up with today. I had been disappointed so much that my will to live was being sapped away. Hildetaura had returned home, so I decided I may as well return to my room too.

I was really, truly disappointed.

A week had passed since school had begun. When Reliared and I arrived at our classroom, our classmates were staring at us yet again.

“They’re *still* staring,” Reliared remarked.

“I think that’s good, to be honest. It’s like a form of advertisement.”

There were those who would greet us, those who would watch us from afar, and those who would keep a more average distance—but all were still watching us. Reliared was right: we *were* being stared at for quite a long time—and intently too. Even children from different classrooms or different years would drop by our class just to get a peek at us. Were we really that interesting to see in our everyday lives?

If they wanted to talk to us, then they should. But naturally, almost no child was brave enough to actually do that. Still, I liked to believe that this was, in fact, a part of our PR campaign. For the children in the dorms who had seen the three of us on magivision, getting to see us in person was no doubt a rare experience in their mind.

Even though a week had passed, the other children were still maintaining a

good distance from us either because they saw us as a spectacle or as a nuisance. I had thought they would get used to it quickly, but apparently that wasn't the case.

This year's new elementary school students numbered about three hundred. Barring exceptions, that meant that all of the kingdom's six-year-olds had gathered here from across the country and would now spend the next six years together. Incidentally, those exceptions were for the children who went to schools that were sometimes found in large territories outside of the capital.

The three hundred of us were split into different classes of around twenty-five people each and were expected to complete classes and school events prepared by the academy within those groups.

Elementary school included the first year through the sixth year. Reliared and I were considered first-years, given we had just enrolled. Whether fortunate or unfortunate, we had ended up together in class 1-4. I was at the window seat furthest back, and Reliared was next to me. Our unfamiliar school life had started with us being a spectacle all the while.

As a matter of course, our personal attendants were not allowed into the classrooms. Servants were only allowed to assist with specific daily duties for their appointed children. Given they were neither students nor staff, they were treated more like members of the public.

While on the topic, Neal and Hildetaura were in their third year.

"Did you receive any contact from Miss Hilde?" Reliared seemed to be wondering the same thing I was.

"No, nothing. I can only assume it's because she's still working out a proposal."

If her idea had been refused, she'd have probably pulled us into another meeting already. I hadn't checked to confirm she was still going to class, but surely there was no way she was truant.

Four days had passed since that first Project Magivision meeting that Hildetaura had abruptly left. I had no idea if there had been any progress in that department, but it wasn't as if I could do anything about that. I would just have

to wait for any updates.

“I think I’ll have to start recording again soon.”

I had received a letter from my parents yesterday stating that the *Occupation Observation* episodes that we had stocked up had all aired now, so we would need to record some new episodes soon.

It had been a long time since I had had such a long break between recordings. Actually, it might have been the first real break I’d had since I started seriously recording *Nia Liston’s Occupation Observation*.

“Oh, same here.”

Seemed the Silver family was in the same boat.

“I guess we’ll both be busier in the coming days.”

Our school life had only just started, and there was still a lot I was unaccustomed to, including being treated like a spectacle everywhere I went. If recording started on top of that, would I end up with even less time to train? I had managed to get into such a nice routine too. Even Lynokis was crying tears of joy every day as we trained.

“That reminds me, Nia, you should come join me in one of my recordings.”

“Hm?”

“You appeared on magivision with me when we were trying on our school uniforms, right? Apparently, that did really well in the Silver territories. People want you to appear again.”

Ah, the recording I had dragged Neal into. It was all well and good that it had done well in the Silver territories, but I hadn’t heard anything about how well it had done back home. I couldn’t see it doing *poorly*, though.

“Sorry, but I can’t make decisions like that by myself. The only reason I participated in the last one was because it was on such short notice that I didn’t even have time to contact my family about it in the first place.”

Reliared was skeptical. “Why? Is the pay not good enough? Or is your schedule just too full?”

“Those may be part of it, but I’m acting on behalf of my parents and the Liston family, so I would rather avoid doing anything they don’t want me to.”

It was my duty to listen to the orders of the Liston family. I would speak, I would state my opinion, I would use my strength, and—were I given the permission—I would even use my chi. But the Liston family would always come first. That fact would never change, not while my life was replacing Nia’s. I had to live a life that she would be proud of, and showing dedication to my parents was a part of that.

“So it’s because of your family then?”

“The Liston family invested in magivision for my sake. I won’t feel right if I don’t make back what they put in. If I don’t, then there would have been no reason for them working to get me back to health.”

“Oh, yeah, you...used to be really ill, huh?”

Indeed I did. They were days filled with impatience and frustration, but I was much better now. Now I was so healthy I could beat up tigers and dragons as a warm-up. I was excessively healthy, to a degree that not being able to get all my pent-up fighting energy out was starting to weigh on me.

And so, another school day ended. The children dispersed, finally freed from their greatest nemesis. Those who were in clubs would go on to those activities, while those who weren’t would hang out somewhere or return to the dorms.

My after-school time was open now, but it was almost time for recordings to begin again. The little free time I still had before we hit the ground running almost felt even more precious than before. I could not waste it.

I returned to the dorm with Reliared, and there we split up to go to our own rooms.

When I made it back to my room, I was greeted by the sight I’d hoped for.

“W-W-W-Welcome...back, Young...Mistress!”

Lynokis, wearing light clothes instead of her usual servant attire, was sweating profusely as she remained in a stance with her fists clenched. She was also very out of breath.

“How many sets is that now?” I asked her.

“Th-Three hundred and...three.”

Not bad.

“Seventeen left, then. I’ll keep watch, so continue.”

“Y-Yes, Young Mistress...!”

Muscles tensed up across her whole body, Lynokis continued to carry out the forms I had taught her with a slight layer of chi cloaking her as she went through the movements. Her exhaustion was due to her inability to control her chi. The act of tensing her muscles was forcing the energy to accumulate.

Though usually accidentally, even beginners could expel chi on the exhale of an attack. Such coincidences could occur when the mind, body, and spirit were all in sync at an enhanced level for just a moment. It was an entirely unconscious act, with the only real awareness coming from the fighter realizing that they would sometimes get a really good attack in without knowing why.

As Lynokis was still unable to voluntarily use the power of chi, I was having her train in stances that would bring her muscles to their limit and stay there in order to force the accidental release of chi. Once she became able to hold that steady, she could work towards relaxing her muscles while maintaining the energy.

That was one of the methods to acquire control of chi, but...it seemed like there was still a way to go.

Two weeks had passed since school had begun, which signaled the beginning of recording for both the Listons and the Silvers. The school week at Altoire Academy only included one day off, so we had no choice but to use that single day for our magivision work.

As this would be my first recording since I had started school, Bendelio had come to direct the recording—his face still distinctive as ever. Seeing it again after so long only reaffirmed for me how distinctive his face really was. When that familiar look came into view at the port, I was startled.

It was rare for him to come to my recordings nowadays. Given he was the supervisor for the production crews in the Liston territories, he always had a mountain of tasks to do and was unable to come to my sets.

“We’re in talks with the broadcasting station in the capital right now. If they go well, we might be able to nab spaces there for both our crew and the Silvers’ crew. Basically, each territory would have its own little branch within the capital.”

That explained why he was here, at least. He had just decided to drop by because he was around.

Still, a new branch, huh? Apparently, things had been progressing in ways that I hadn’t even begun to consider. Not that I knew exactly what a new branch would entail, but I was familiar with the problems facing our current setup.

“The travel time was the big problem, after all, hm?” I replied.

It took over half a day to get from the royal capital to the Liston territories. Going back and forth between the locations each week would be tough, not to speak of how inefficient it was. You would end up spending over a day’s worth of time on travel. And airship fuel wasn’t cheap either.

“If the production crew has to keep traveling here for *Occupation Observation*, it’ll bleed into the production schedules for other shows, as well. If we could establish a base of operations here though, we could easily station one of the crews at the capital permanently. It would make it easier to record episodes at other floating islands outside of the Liston territories too.”

He was right; returning to the Liston territories would be a bit of a hassle, but at least any floating islands close to the capital were instantly much more accessible from here. It would make it much easier to put together recording schedules too. In fact, it sounded like they had already made lengthy plans for recording in and around the capital. I had primarily recorded in my home territory before now, but with this new setup, I would now have ample opportunity to record in Altoire.

“Oh, but of course, your health comes first, Nia. A full day’s flight is already tough on adults; I don’t like to think how tough it is for a kid.”

I was perfectly fine no matter what they did, so I would just leave the scheduling to them anyway.

Boarding the familiar airship used for the production crew, I chatted with Bendelio as we traveled to our destination. It had been quite a while since I last saw him, so we had plenty to talk about.

“Sorry it’s not your mom or your dad here to see you. This is the kind of thing you talk about with your parents, not some random old man.”

I wouldn’t deny it.

We’d spoken about how my time at school was going, about how I’d met the third princess Hildetaura, and about how I’d ended up forming a friendship with the Silver family’s youngest daughter. We spoke about work too, of course, but it was mainly about my school life. These were topics usually saved for family, not someone who was essentially your boss.

“Maybe. But I don’t think it’s much of an issue. You’re not a stranger anymore, Mr. Bendelio.”

It seemed Bendelio had known my parents for a while, but we’d only known each other for a little over a year. Still, I would say I’d spent a good long time with this distinctive face. If you compared it to how long Nia had lived, I’d known him for a sixth of her life.

He never really appeared at my shoots anymore, but I was greatly indebted to him for his assistance when I was starting out. As someone who also appeared on magivision, I viewed Bendelio as a trailblazer in the field. I had made it this far following his teachings; in a sense, I was his pupil.

This man had such a superficial, sloppy look to his distinctive face, and yet he was actually a very considerate person. That consideration of his had helped me many a time.

In the magivision industry, just being strong didn’t mean things always worked out—in fact, there were many moments when it didn’t help at all. Someone like Bendelio was so formidable in an environment like this that he was deserving of being called a strong foe. He was honestly stronger than me in

this regard.

“Ha ha ha, really? You might as well call me papa, then,” he said with a laugh.

“Then if you’ll excuse me. Papa, how has your work been? Are you managing to carry out your duties without incident?”

He chuckled again. “Wow, you’re quite good at this. Almost makes me want to give you an allowance.”

“You’ll give me something? Then give me an unexplored island. Please, papa?”

“I...suppose I should have expected such an outrageous demand from you.”

After the half-joking exchange, we went on to the more important work matters that needed to be covered. I told him about how Reliared wanted to collaborate with us again and made it clear that if it fit the schedule, I wanted them to accept—I would do anything to make it happen. I also told him about the idea that Hildetaura had had about audience participation programs, however vague much of the plan still was.

“Audience participation, huh? It *would* gather more interest.” He understood the point of it immediately.

See? He truly was a trailblazer in the field.

“If you think it sounds interesting, then please let the capital’s broadcasting station know,” I told him.

“Sure, will do. I think it sounds fun.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t believe what Hildetaura had to say about it, but when it came to magivision matters, I trusted Bendelio’s distinctive face the most. Surely if he found it interesting, then perhaps we could use it after all.

Though I was looking forward to seeing how this proposal would be realized, I was also a little afraid as well. Even if the idea itself was good, it would mean nothing if we failed in execution.

It was a given that this idea would be something primarily performed by me, Hildetaura, and Reliared as the actual magivision stars. Whether we succeeded or failed rested on our shoulders. If we failed, the losses would no doubt be

immense.

A world in which strength alone does not guarantee victory truly is a frightful one.

The shoot ended without incident, and I was able to return to the capital shortly after noon. We had been recording at a farm on a floating island a short distance from Altoire.

The island was famous for its luxury beef taken from Mooamoora cows frequently eaten by the upper classes. No one was sure if it was because of Vikeranda's destruction of the continent, but apparently, the grass grown on that island was known for its exceptionally good quality, making people believe that the secret behind the exquisite taste of a Mooamoora cow's meat was the grass they were fed.

Though its beef was famous, the lesser-known milk was also delicious. I was so sure that it would make a fortune if they sold it as is, but it seemed that they only sold it to restaurants or made cheese with it, and didn't sell it directly.

This *Occupation Observation* episode would feature me working on that farm. I wore some overalls and cleaned out the barn and brushed the cows, I herded sheep together with the sheepdog, I challenged the sheepdog to a ball-fetching contest and won by a landslide (making the dog hate me), and finally, we had a barbecue together with both the production crew and the farmworkers, being given the chance to try some of the Mooamoora meat they had prepared specially for us. It was a fun session.

"Ahhh, your shoots are always so simple, Nia. It's a relief not having to stay alert all the time," Bendelio said as we began returning home with all the familiar faces of the production crew.

The crew had been busy before I started school, and it seemed that even now, that was the case.

"Young Mistress, what would you like to do after this? Do you wish to return to the dorms?" Lynokis asked after we were left at the port. My attendant had been lurking in the shadows this whole time, but she chose to speak up once we were alone.

“Hmm, well, we have already eaten.” If we hadn’t, I would have suggested we go eat something first, but I had gotten to devour a whole bunch of tasty meat back at the farm. I didn’t mind the toughness and chewiness of red meat, but fatty beef was its own kind of heaven.

Since we’d already eaten that, though, there wasn’t particularly anything I wanted. If anything...

“How about we go have some tea somewhere?” I wanted tea. I could technically have some back at the dorm, but given we were already away from the campus, we may as well have something outside for a change.

“That sounds good. Is there anywhere in particular you would like to go?” Lynokis asked me.

I didn’t want us to use too much money, so I ruled out any high-end places. I would go to those kinds of establishments if invited, but I wouldn’t dare visit in my own private time. With that being the case, anywhere was fine honestly, but, hm... Oh, of course. I supposed it was about time I paid him a visit.

Let’s go to Anzel’s place, the bar of the dogs.

If I wanted to do that, though, first I would have to somehow get Lynokis off my back.

Hildetaura Altoire

Third princess of Altoire, famous in the capital for broadcasting her royal duties on magivision. A bright, cheery girl. Kind to all, but deep inside, she holds a desire for world domination. Quite the ambitious young lady.

Age:

8 years old

Title/Occupation:

Third Princess of Altoire

Alias:

The Approachable Princess

Dreams for the future:

“I want to become someone’s wife (but with someone I truly love, not as part of a political marriage).”

What are your current goals?

“I wish to move away from carrying out royal commitments all the time and have more freedom in what shows I can appear on for magivision.”

“Those who control magivision control the world. That is what I personally believe.”



Chapter 4: The Shifty Shadow Rat

I somehow succeeded in fooling Lynokis in order to escape her surveillance. Though an excuse like “I want to go see some naughty underwear on my own” working on her honestly made me more suspicious than anything...but she otherwise carried out her work well, so I chose to let it go. However unreliable she may have seemed, she *was* my apprentice. I could overlook the small stuff. Now that she was under me, I wanted to do what I could to humor her.

“I see your renovations are complete.”

Over my year of nonstop recording, I had managed to find the time to slip off to the old bar whenever we visited the capital. The bar used to be in absolute shambles, but each time I visited, there was always something new or some part that had been repaired.

Over time, those ruins had transformed into a bar again.

The first time I had visited was roughly a year ago. Renovations had been carried out over that time, and now both the exterior and interior looked much more professional. There had already been customers last time I came, but there had been no sign up outside. Now there was, so I assumed that meant they had finished fixing the place up.

Perhaps it was time for me to stop calling it the bar of the dogs and call it Shifty Shadow Rat as the sign said.

The bar was down a dark alley off the main street. It was also where the rough types gathered, but they seemed to accept the refurbished establishment. In front of the bar were those who had gotten completely smashed first thing in the morning and ended up passed out on the ground, as well as others who were swinging their bottles around as if they had forgotten the way home. It was the kind of chaotic sight I had expected from such a place, filled with those who had been dealt a rougher hand by the world.

I was glad they appeared to be getting business at least.

“Oi, the hell’s that kid—”

“Shhh! Don’t look at her, and don’t even speak a word to her. If she catches your eye, your ass is getting pummeled!”

“The hell you on ab— GWAH?!”

“What did I just tell you, dude?! You’re gonna get *me* in trouble for *your* stupidity! Don’t stand out!”

Some flashy guy was lecturing a new face who didn’t know who I was. Good, good. I was perfectly happy to take on any strong foes, but I would much prefer if the weaker ones knew their place. Beating up weaklings wasn’t exactly a hobby of mine. If they really wanted to be beat up, though, they could ask. I wouldn’t refuse just because they were weak, no matter my personal preferences.

I’d shut up anyone who’d dare approach me with my fists almost every time I came here, so it seemed word had finally gotten around about me. I imagined there were those who recognized me from magivision, but no one had started up any rumors or made a fuss about that just yet.

No matter how similar they may have appeared, no matter how rare that striking white hair was, the Nia Liston that appeared on magivision and the Nia Liston that visited the bar just didn’t match up in their heads, so they couldn’t believe it was really me.

Or it was simply a case of not wanting to risk getting involved with me. I was still an aristocrat’s daughter after all.

Walking past the residents of the back alleys who knew well enough to avoid my gaze even while drunk, I entered the bar.

The booming voices boasting of their victories instantly quieted and then silenced altogether. Whispering voices no doubt discussing nefarious deeds came to a stop. Unrefined laughter quickly hushed. The lone wolves partaking in solitary drinks by the bar counter freed up their seats.

“Hey there, Lily.”

The moment I entered, the hustle and bustle of the dimly lit interior had immediately stilled, but the first to break that quiet was a plump lady whose body was eighty percent sex appeal.

Her name was Fressa, and she was an acquaintance of Anzel's whom he had hired to work at his bar. Sure, she was a voluptuous woman, but that wasn't all she was. The way she had trained her body was remarkable. It was the body of someone trained not in martial arts but in assassination. That was a good enough reason to stop trying to dig into her history.

Everyone here had their own story to tell, including myself.

"Yo, Lily. Been a hot minute, huh?"

I walked up to the bar counter without hesitation and sat myself down in front of the laid-back bartender.

"Pleasure to see you again, Anzel. Congratulations on your official opening."

Incidentally, Lily was my nickname here. I wasn't sure who had started it, but someone had started calling me Snow Lily because of my white hair, and since then, everyone here had taken to using the pseudonym. People using my real name here could cause issues, so I didn't bother correcting them.

"Thanks. Took long enough, I'll say. Technically I opened up shop last month, though."

Wow, it had already been over a month since I'd last found the time to stop by? When I really thought about it, perhaps that last visit had been about two months ago. It certainly was quite a long time—not that the frequency of my visits was within my control. Given I hadn't been living in the capital, the time I could actually swing by had always been limited.

"I'll be able to come a bit more frequently than before," I told him. I had started living in the capital now after all—even if I was just in the school dorms.

"Cause of school?"

I chose not to respond and instead ordered some strong alcohol... Or at least, I thought about it, but even if this was some shady pub down a similarly shady alley, that didn't mean it was a good idea for a six-year-old to be drinking

alcohol.

The longer I continued casual chatter with Anzel, the more those around us returned to what they had been doing before I entered. Though, the seats to the immediate left and right of me remained vacant for my entire stay.

Anzel was the suited man I had fought way back when this place was still just a regular old abandoned building. I hadn't heard the specifics from him, but apparently, he wasn't ex-mafia as I had originally thought. In fact, he was a little like a bodyguard they put in charge of any of the dirtier work. He'd certainly protect the mafia if he was hired to.

I could tell it wasn't a topic he really wanted to think about, so I hadn't pushed for details. And quite frankly, I didn't care about his history, so I didn't ask.

Anzel had bought out this bar specifically so he could stay in contact with me. He had gathered up all the money he had ever saved and used it all to buy the rights to the land. Hiring some thugs living in the area, he repaired and refurbished the building, and he'd finally managed to officially open it as a bar.

At first, he really had just bought this land because he wanted to find me again. When he learned how cheap it was, he had wasted no time in buying it, thinking that with a bit of elbow grease, he could turn it into a good place to live, as well. If he was buying it as a new house, then he couldn't really call it a waste.

However, the investment had left him practically penniless, so he had decided he may as well try to start up a new bar given the foundation was already there. He'd intended to leave the business of it all to someone else, but after all of the work he'd put into it, he'd ended up forming an attachment to the place and decided he may as well become the bartender.

The last time I came here, Anzel had muttered away to me while cleaning a glass: "What good's a bodyguard that can't even win his own fights? People ain't gonna hire me if I don't live up to my reputation. I swore that I would absolutely get revenge on you one day. I did, but..."

In order to meet me, the target of his revenge, Anzel had acquired this place. I had promised to come back here, and so I did, though somewhat irregularly.

Anzel had been burning with the fires of revenge, and so he had continued challenging me to fights—and had kept losing in the process. As a result, his spirit had broken. He had realized that I wasn't someone that could be beaten with an ordinary level of training.

And now, here he was as the master of the Shifty Shadow Rat. Well, it wasn't so rare for people's goals to change somewhere down the road.

Honestly, despite what we'd been through, I'd ended up chatting with Anzel a good bit. I had never intended to deepen our friendship nor had I intended to become a regular at his bar, but before I knew it, I was doing just that.

There were very few people I could chat with not as Nia Liston but as a martial artist. Perhaps it was for that reason that I had developed a liking for this place.

"Here. Drink up."

"Thank you. You're very thoughtful."

"Really, I wanna just tell you to head back home."

And that was the correct way for him to feel. This was not a place for a six-year-old. If I had been in his shoes and it were anyone other than me, I would absolutely be telling them to leave. It would be better for both of us if I quickly said what I needed to say and left. It wouldn't be good for me to be away so long that Lynokis would start worrying either. Even if I felt slight distrust of her, that didn't mean it was good to make her worry.

"You...really are thoughtful," I muttered, realizing what was in the glass that Anzel had given me.

It wasn't alcohol.

Naturally, I couldn't order anything alcoholic at this age, but I'd secretly been hoping that he would still serve some. If it was put in front of me, then what choice would I have? But no, he had given me some of the fruit juice he would use for cocktails.

Tch, you're meant to be part of the underworld, aren't you? Why do you have

common sense? Gimme alcohol, goddammit... What is this place, a kid's playground?

It was pointless to get mad at him for it, though, so I let him be...for now. I seriously wanted a drink, though...

“And? Has there been anyone wanting to challenge me?”

That was the question I asked every time I came here. The first two times, there had been challengers waiting, including Anzel himself, but since then, there was nothing. It appeared rumors of my strength had made the rounds in this area.

I shouldn't have been surprised. I *was* the one who had completely crushed those whatever-Dogs. At least, I could only assume that was who that gang of almost a hundred thugs I had beat up here a year ago was.

It wasn't as if I had been paying attention to who was who in a circumstance like that, and I wouldn't check either. Before I knew it, they were all down. I didn't know what happened to them after that, but I had made sure to hold back so I was sure none of them had died. For all I knew, there may have been a few who were only made stronger by such an encounter and had made their return.

All I remembered about that night was that my rampage had been a fun one. Being able to beat people up without guilt was a good feeling indeed.

“You realize no one wants to fight you, right?”

I shrugged. “Hey, I'm fine with fighting you.”

“I don't want to fight you anymore either. Ain't no way in hell I'm winning, and I've got my job here now anyway.”

Now hold your damn horses. Why was he acting like he'd completely become a bartender? What happened to that Anzel who'd shown absolutely no mercy towards a child? Was he telling me he planned to just live like a regular civilian?

“Oh, don't say something so tragic.”

“Huh?”

“Let's wreak more havoc together. You should aim for a blood-soaked

warrior's path where you beat those who would resist to a pulp and kick the asses of those who get in your way in a rain of blood. You suit that kind of life," I said.

"I think you mean *you* suit that kind of life. Don't drag me into your crazy shit."

And that was why it was so tragic! I would never say that I wanted to *drag* someone down the path of domination with me, but martial arts were martial arts. Hearing someone who used to seek power just give it up was sad. Even if we were on opposing sides, we were two people after power. Losing such comrades was just lonely.

Even more so because the path of domination was a solitary one. Only one person could stand at the top after all.

"Is this that Lily brat?!"

Just as I was thinking about how to drag the reborn Anzel back down the path of power, someone called out my name. I turned around and came face-to-face with some overconfident roughneck who was clearly all brawn and no brains standing in front of me.

"Why've the boys got their panties in a twist over a tiny girl like this?! Watch, I'll have her neck snapped in two seconds!" he declared, all while looking down on me.

The onlookers were giggling and snickering to themselves. No doubt this was a sight they had seen over and over again. They were more than used to this situation. "Poor guy. Dude doesn't realize he's about to get beaten within an inch of his life," they'd say to themselves.

Mmm, I appreciated his enthusiasm at least. He would definitely completely lose to that instructor for the Heavenstriker style, though—not just in muscle but clearly in strength too.

This guy really was one of those brutes who were big and that was it.

"Sorry, but we're having an important chat right now," I told him, in an attempt to brush him off. "Could you go quietly have your drink in that corner

over there?”

“You wanna say that again?!”

“Here, this is on me. Go calm yourself down over there, all right?”

Realizing my stance, Anzel served up another drink and placed it on the bar counter. The large man chugged it down in one gulp and slammed it back on the table.

“Out the front, brat! I’ll make you go home crying to your mommy! Better remember that you’re next, stupid-ass bartender!”

Anzel rolled his eyes. “What? I’m getting pulled into this too?”

“I’ll show you that you’re the one needin’ a bodyguard! Don’t worry, I’ll let you stay here for only half of your earnings!” The man shouted one hell of an unreasonable demand, but Anzel’s lackadaisical expression never once changed.

“Cool stuff. I’ll definitely consider it if you’re stronger than Lily.” Anzel was clearly not even the tiniest bit fazed. This must have been a common sight for him considering the kind of environment he had been living in. In other words, this roughneck was one of those racketeers.

Well then, at least I won’t have to feel guilty about this. I can take him down without a care.

“Anzel, you want a shot at him?” I asked.

“I mean, he’s challenging you, isn’t he? Go wild.”

Well, okay then. It was a bit of a pain, but whatever. If he were only a bit stronger, at least I could’ve gotten some fun out of it.

“Let’s go out front then, shall we? Oh, Anzel, leave my juice there, okay? I’ll be back to have the rest.”

If this place was still the ruins it had been before, we could duke it out here without a care, but now it was a proper establishment. Dirtying it or destroying it was an absolute no-no. I didn’t want to bother the customers either or get in the way of Anzel’s business.

“Nah, you chug that shit down, kid. You ain’t comin’ back here,” the meathead demanded.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay. Let’s get you to bed now, mister, okay?”

“Stop treatin’ me like some old man!”

And so, we left the building.

“If you say sorry right now, I’ll let yo—”

The roughneck seemed like he was saying something as he faced me, but I immediately dashed by him. I’d given him a solid punch to the stomach, but the drunks watching us wouldn’t have been able to see anything, and the man himself likely had no idea what happened before he was losing consciousness.

I headed back into the ba— *Wait, hang on.*

“At least leave some of his money. And if you’re taking his clothes, only take the coat.”

Given where we were, it was practically a free-for-all for an unconscious man’s belongings. I made sure to tell them not to loot everything at least.

And after that...

“Is anyone here known for their strength? I’ll even take on a monster if you have access to those.”

After putting the roughneck to rest, I returned to the bar and continued my conversation with Anzel. Not that I had much faith, honestly. There had been some challengers at first, but now they all just wimped out. That roughneck likely wouldn’t ever challenge me again either. Though he was so weak it would just be a pain if he did.

But as it turned out, luck was on my side.

“Dunno if this’ll satisfy your needs, but I did hear something interesting.”

“Hmm?”

“Apparently, they’re gonna hold a tournament at the Umbral Arena soon.”

The...Umbral Arena? I had no idea what that was, but what a positively powerful-sounding name!

“It’s really just an illegal underground arena,” Anzel explained, still polishing glasses when I asked what this Umbral Arena was. “It’s the one place where the twisted desires of the bored wealthy can be fulfilled. They can watch people fight for real, and if they want bloodshed and death, they’ll get that too.”

What the hell? That was what I assumed it would be from the name, but wasn’t that exactly what I had been after for so long?

“So there really are such fun places even in a capital city known for its naive peace? That’s absolutely amazing! Why would you stay quiet about something like this for so long? I’m almost offended!”

“Because I knew exactly what you’d do if I told you. You’d start off saying you just want to go take a look and next thing I’d know, you’d be a competitor. Right?”

I didn’t think I could convince anyone if I said no, honestly. It was so obvious that there was barely any point in trying. “Not a chance.”

Anzel’s eyes had been looking at the glass the whole time, but upon those words, he looked up at me. “You realize there’s a ton of dirty, corrupt aristocrats going in and out of there, right? Someone as famous as you goes, you’re getting caught immediately. Right, Miss *Liston*?”

Oh my.

“Did you see me somewhere?”

“What, think I don’t have my own MagiPad? I see you on there pretty much every day.”

Did that make him a fan then?

“I thought there was an unspoken rule not to bring up that kind of thing.”

“If I didn’t, there’d be no way in hell I could stop you. If you heard about this from someone else, then just casually went off to the arena like it was nothing and caused a massive commotion, the ones who’ll suffer the most are the Liston family, no? Can’t make that point if I don’t blow your cover.”

Now that wasn’t good at all... My biggest priority was the Liston family’s prosperity.

“But I want to enter. Like, really want to.” There was no way I could hear something so exhilarating and just let that chance pass me by. I could smell the scent of the strong. I definitely needed to go. *I wanna go, I wanna go!*

“Think of your goddamn age. At least pretend like you just want to go watch.”

“I’ll just go to watch, honest!” I pleaded. “I won’t enter! I won’t interrupt a fight, I swear. I won’t touch a single hair on anyone’s head. So it’s fine, right? I’m just gonna go watch. Just a look!”

“I trust you less than the guys that come round and ask to start a tab.”

Yeah, I couldn’t fault him for that one. I sure wouldn’t believe me.

“Why are you acting like a child throwing a tantrum? What’s wrong?”

Anzel let out a lethargic sigh as the voluptuous lady that felt wasted on some back alley bar sat beside me. How was her chest even fitting in her clothes? Those were way too big.

“Should I be acting any other way?”

“Well, you don’t do anything else like a child.”

Hey, you couldn’t blame me. If I considered this life as just an extension of my past one, then I was way beyond childhood. I was usually putting so much extra effort into my front when on the surface that I was decidedly very happy to drop it here.

“We were talking about the Umbral Arena,” Anzel explained.

“Ahh, that. Were you being selfish and begging to get to enter the tournament like I thought you would? What you’re asking for isn’t cute, but it *is* cute watching you throw a tantrum.” A plump hand gave me a head pat. “But you know, actually entering might be a bit of a tough ask, but getting into the audience should be simple enough, don’t you think?”

Really?!

Anzel sighed. “You could’ve at least consulted with me before telling her that.”

There was a way for a kid like me to get into the arena?! So there really was?!

I shot Anzel a look. “Does that mean you were just messing around to see my reaction then?”

“No, I just have my own reasons.”

“Hm? Well...I won’t push. Anyway, you’re going to tell me how to go, right?”

“Yeah. It’s not like it’s anything special, though.” True to his word, the way Anzel told me to get into the arena was an incredibly straightforward and reasonable method.

I see, I see. I’d thought I would only be able to get in by infiltrating the place while I was stuck in this body, but apparently I could go right in through the front door.

“You *need* to make sure you have a disguise though,” he said. “You’d already stand out being a kid; your hair will get you busted immediately.”

A disguise, hm? Well, at least I saw his point. The daughter of an aristocrat seen at an illegal fight would be a disgrace to the family. The last thing I wanted to do was cause trouble for the Listons.

“Then I’ll go make preparations immediately.”

After learning when and where I would be doing this, I drank the rest of my juice and stood up off the bar stool.

Oh, but before I left, there was something I had to do first.

“Fressa,” I called out to her, just as she was standing to return to her work.

“Yes?”

“May I see your panties for a moment?”

“Huh? Lily, the hell are you doing?” Anzel immediately asked.

What was I doing? I was very clearly looking up Fressa’s skirt. There was in fact a throwing knife belt tied around her thigh. I would make sure to keep it a secret. It seemed my assumption that she wasn’t your average barmaid was correct.

The way Fressa barely even panicked upon having this done to her really showed what she was used to experiencing.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” she asked.

“I had said I was coming here to see some naughty underwear, so I thought it important I at least do that.”

“Ahh, I see... Wait, that told me nothing.”

“Turned out they weren’t naughty at all, though. You have some surprisingly cute underwear.”

“Really? It’s quite practical—”

“Oi, don’t do this in my bar. Or in front of me. This isn’t some hostess club.”

I then left the bar, driven out by Anzel’s icy glare. I stepped over the roughneck who was still resting peacefully outside and began making my way home.

I didn’t have much time to act alone. Though I was suspicious of her, Lynokis was diligent in her work, and she was most certainly waiting for me. After all, she *was* hired by the Liston family, and in a sense, she was a member of our family as well. I would rather not cause her *too* much trouble.

That was why I chose to leave it there for today—all while thinking about the Umbral Arena.

Just as the incredibly out of place, white-haired girl left the Shifty Shadow Rat, a similarly out of place girl wearing a servant’s attire stepped over the unconscious roughneck lying half naked on the ground and entered the bar.

The moment she did so, the place went silent. Without paying it any mind, the attendant sat herself down at the bar where the white-haired girl had been sitting moments ago.

“You didn’t say anything you shouldn’t have, did you?” the attendant asked, a murderous aura radiating off of her as she glared at the nonchalant bartender.

“Calm yourself. I only told her what I thought was necessary. I said this last time, missy, but this here’s a bar. A customer who ain’t here to drink ain’t a customer at all. Get lost.”

“I’ll kill everyone here if anything happens to her, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, whatever. Could you leave now?”

“I’ll kill you if you leak any info about her, *okay?*”

“Why is every conversation with you like speaking to a brick wall? It’s not a conversation if you don’t even try to listen to what the other person is saying.”

But of course. After all, Lynokis’s purpose here was not to have a conversation but to give a warning and, depending on the situation, potentially silence those present as well.

Nia Liston had made it routine to come here whenever she was in the capital for work. The bar had been transformed from a run-down abandoned building into a functioning business. It had become unnecessarily easy for an unnecessary number of people to gather there. As Nia’s bodyguard and as a personal attendant of the Liston family, making that warning was required for both aspects of her work.

The moment Nia first started visiting the Shifty Shadow Rat, and the moment Lynokis realized Nia would *keep* visiting the Shifty Shadow Rat, Lynokis had entered the place by herself to warn those in the premises, even beating down various troublemakers. She had fought with Anzel numerous times by this point too.

They were on equal footing with each other in terms of their strength, so their battles frequently ended in stalemates to prevent them from dragging on for too long. But at this point, deep inside, neither of them really wanted to fight the other anymore. Lynokis wanted to avoid getting injured so she wouldn’t be impeded as an attendant. Anzel didn’t want to fight her because she was someone close to Nia. The last thing he wanted to do was cause Lynokis injury and incur Nia’s wrath instead.

The reason Anzel had hired Fressa—someone who he knew was also strong—was actually to deal with Lynokis should it come down to it. If worse came to worst, they would be able to stop her together. To the two of them in the bar, Lynokis was a troublesome customer; if they killed her, Nia would absolutely seek them out for revenge. Lynokis was incredibly strong herself given she was meant to be a bodyguard, but Nia was on a completely different level.

If Nia got serious, she would absolutely destroy them. In fact, Anzel was sure she could level a whole country if she so chose.

“Listen...” Fressa sat herself beside Lynokis as she had just done for Nia. “Why not come *with* Lily next time? She seems to be having a hard time trying to keep you away from her, after all, and if you’re curious what we’re talking about, wouldn’t it be easier if you came along and listened in?”

Lynokis didn’t even pay Fressa any mind, instead continuing to stare silently at Anzel. It was almost as if she had absolutely no interest in anyone else, like if she shut what other people were saying out, everything would work out how she wanted.

Fressa helplessly shrugged her shoulders and returned to her work.

“You’re done here, right? Then get going. Lily’s gonna be waiting for you,” Anzel said.

Saying not a single excessive word, the stubborn servant rose from her seat.

The second challenge Anzel always faced after Nia had now ended.

“How does that girl manage to look even more insane every time she comes here?” Anzel sighed, downing a glass of cheap alcohol.

The first time the attendant had visited the establishment, her fighting ability had been on the same level as his, but now, Anzel had no confidence he could win against her. He could tell that she was stronger with every visit she made. Lily was most likely training her.

No chance in hell I’m winning at this point, Anzel thought to himself. That attendant’s strength had already far surpassed his own. It didn’t help that she was even more vicious than Lily. At least Lily was still friendly enough. If you spoke to her, she’d listen, and she would rarely cause a fuss unless someone was directly hostile to her.

Her attendant, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. The worst part was that it was basically impossible to hold a conversation with her. A nuisance that one couldn’t reason with was a disaster waiting to happen. And now, the avenue to remove her by force was no longer available to him.

Unaware of the bartender's worries, the thugs and poor homeless in the bar continued downing their drinks and making merry.

"How am I getting myself outta this mess, eh...?"

Anzel didn't particularly care about what happened to his customers, but he would protect that which he owned. Thinking about the attendant only left him with a heavy heart.

"Excuse me, could you repeat that?"

"I said I'm going to the Umbral Arena."

"I'm sorry, perhaps my hearing is going. Once more, please."

"For the third time, I'm going to the Umbral Arena."

"May I ask one more time just to be absolutely sure?"

"I am going to the Umbral Arena."

"Would you reconsider if I bowed down and begged in tears?"

"Don't think that will work on me every time. I am going to the Umbral Arena."

"I'll tell your father."

"I'll be adamant to him that I didn't go."

"You aren't a child; stop being so selfish."

"Excuse me, I *am* a child."

This was quite the negative reaction. After leaving Anzel's bar, I had met up with Lynokis at the café we had agreed to meet at and returned to the dorm with her.

"What happened to that naughty underwear you were going to see?" Lynokis had asked, serving the tea once we'd gotten settled.

"They were surprisingly cute," I'd said. And then, as if it were regular everyday conversation, I had slipped the words in: "I want to go to the Umbral Arena."

Naturally, that thought was rejected, no matter my argument. Lynokis, who I

had already assumed would be the greatest hurdle, was, to my *great* surprise, being the greatest hurdle. She hadn't been this adamant about stopping me going somewhere since that time I had tried to sneak off to an unexplored island. That may have been the first time she had cried and begged for me to reconsider. She appeared to have caught on to how well it worked against me, given she would now always do that whenever she wanted to stop me from doing something...

But this time was different.

I WILL go to the Umbral Arena.

"Where did you even learn of such a thing to begin with?"

"Does that matter?"

"Yes, it does... But it's not so important for now." Oh, good. I would have been in a bit of trouble if she had pursued that line of questioning.

It...wasn't because she already knew where I had gotten the information from, was it?

"But don't you think it's an impossible ask?" Lynokis continued. "You're already so famous. Going to such a dangerous place will reflect badly on the Liston family."

Anzel had said the same thing, but he had also told me how I could work around that.

"I think it has the risk of impacting the magivision industry as well, Young Mistress. Since you frequently appear in it, having a bad reputation will only cause issues for the industry's image."

Seriously...?

"Are you sure? Surely these have nothing to do with each other."

"The Liston Channel is currently held up largely by your reputation and popularity, Young Mistress. Much of the audience views you as a pure and innocent child. I'm sure that if anything comes to light and deviates from that image, it will cause quite the stir."

I couldn't deny that was certainly bad. The Liston family was the most

important thing to me, and magivision immediately came second. We had to keep selling more and more MagiPads. I couldn't do anything to interfere with that. Giving magivision a bad image would cause problems for Reliared and Hildetaura as well.

There are too many shackles, hurdles, and risks attached to all of this...

But I just couldn't give up on going to the underground arena. Anzel had even said—or, well, I had *forced* him to say—that the next tournament would be different than those before. Tournaments were held there practically every week, with fights to the death being the norm, but this time, they would be holding the tournament on a larger scale and with some sort of special rule.

As for what that meant, stealing Anzel's words, it proved they'd managed to arrange someone special for the upcoming matches. I didn't know who held these tournaments, whether it was the mafia, the aristocrats, or someone else entirely, but whoever it was, they were constantly searching for new potential competitors in a show of vanity, to keep attracting the same crowds, for the entertainment, and for the gambling.

The fact that this weekly event was now getting a special rule for this specific tournament meant only one thing: they'd found a particularly special participant, much different from their usual fare. The one joining this time would be especially strong. That was what Anzel had surmised at least, as someone who had spent much of his time in the underworld.

That was why he had spoken about it to me in the first place, since I was searching for strong opponents. He'd said he wasn't one hundred percent sure, but I thought his reasoning was more than sound.

Besides, even if it turned out there wasn't some especially strong participant, I would at least get to see relatively strong fighters punch it out. I would get to see bloodshed. That would be enough for me. My visit wouldn't be completely pointless.

All of that was why I *really* wanted to make sure I could go, but it appeared it would be far more difficult for me to arrange than I thought.

Fine then.

“I understand,” I conceded.

“You finally understand?!”

“I definitely won’t participate. I’ll just watch.”

Let us compromise! I was positive it would be a clean sweep were I to take part, but I could simply choose not to participate! And if I just so happened to provoke someone from the sidelines and frame it like they had picked the fight with me... No, no, I shouldn’t do that kind of thing either.

I really will just go to watch. I’m being absolutely serious here.

All I wanted was to be shown this era’s strongest so that I could be satisfied for once.

“Young Mistress, the problem is that the location itself is a terrible place for you to be seen. It isn’t about what you do there.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to wear a disguise. All I have to do is not get caught and everything will be fine.”

“Even *if* you managed to get by with a disguise, how do you intend to sneak in? It isn’t exactly a place where a small child can go and raise no eyebrows. And just so you’re aware, I refuse to help you with this.”

What she didn’t realize was that the largest problem already had a solution.

“I already have a plan for that. In fact—”

Just as I was about to brag about my very direct plan of attack, there was a violent knock at the door.

“Nia! Are you there, Nia?!”

It was a child’s voice. Could the timing have been any worse for someone to come knocking?

I would realize immediately after that this turned out to be a godsend.

Deciding on a temporary truce for now, we both turned to welcome our guest. Given her voice, I already knew who it was.

“Nia, please listen!”

The moment Lynokis opened the door, Hildetaura rushed into the room with a force unbecoming of a princess. With her was Reliared, whom she had clearly dragged along, and Reliared's tall personal attendant.

"Could you calm down first?" I replied.

Hildetaura was sweating as she strode towards where I sat at the table, and I offered her my lukewarm tea. Though Lynokis had served it to me before our conversation started, I had been unable to take even a sip during our back-and-forth.

Regardless, it had been a while since I last saw Hildetaura. Ever since we had brainstormed the idea of audience participation in magivision, I had seen neither hide nor hair of her. From how she seemed right now, it appeared she had come up with a good plan and had now gathered us together so she could see that through.

Now then, had she prepared a proposal that would leave me surprised? I very much hoped so.

Heh.

However, I had long been involved with magivision as a medium. I had on occasion abandoned myself, abandoned my public life, all to put my heart and soul into appearing on as many programs as possible. I had done my own fair share of coming up with possible proposals, though not as much as those in charge of planning at the broadcasting station.

Had she truly come up with something that would surprise even me?

Despite my arrogance, it took only a few seconds for me to be surprised.

Hildetaura took the teacup without reserve and chugged it. After that inelegant display, she immediately spoke with no signs of having calmed down, "Let's hold a martial arts tournament with audience participation! And air that on magivision!"

...

WHAT?! A MARTIAL ARTS TOURNAMENT?!

Hildetaura and Reliared finally seated themselves down after their sudden intrusion, and after Lynokis served them both tea, we discussed the details of the martial arts tournament that had astounded me in three seconds flat.

“Uh-huh, I see. I see...”

Every enthusiastic and passionate word that Hildetaura spoke only caused my surprise and excitement to dissipate.

Of course. Of-freaking-course.

A martial arts tournament. Although the words themselves had sent my heart racing, Hildetaura’s imagined event was much different than I had initially assumed. The main focus was not martial arts, after all, but the spread of magivision.

“Young Mistress, come back to us!” Upon understanding my dejected state from my back alone, Lynokis worriedly whispered words of encouragement to me.

Do not fret, my student. I’m perfectly fine. I have the Umbral Arena! The main dish has not been stolen from me. So it’s okay that I’m disappointed in the magivision martial arts tournament, despite Hildetaura’s enthusiasm getting my hopes up. It is completely, perfectly fine. It is fine, and I suspected this to begin with.

“What a good idea,” Reliared remarked.

The idea itself was very simple, so even Reliared had no issues in understanding. Even though I was only getting more depressed, I simply accepted that this was something I could not change. I would concede since I had my main dish waiting for me. Because my main dish still awaited, I...

Sigh.

“That sounds great,” I said, trying my best to cheer myself up. Like Reliared said, it *was* a good idea, and simple as well. “Magivision’s key selling point is that people can watch events even from afar, after all.”

The martial arts tournament idea that Hildetaura had brought forward would be held at the academy, allowing students from all across the school to

participate. In other words, it was a tournament to decide who was the strongest at Altoire Academy.

It was compulsory for children aged six to twelve to attend school in the Kingdom of Altoire. Those who lived too far away to commute moved into the school's dorms and took up residence away from home.

The martial arts tournament was taking advantage of that.

In practice, the compulsory education system was still young. In the past, all schools had required fees to be paid by the student. The aristocrats had had no issue with this, but many commoners had been unable to attend school in their youth. Going to school had both tuition and living expenses, so it would've been difficult for them for a variety of reasons.

What that meant was that many parents wouldn't know what exactly their kids did at school. And so, Hildetaura had stumbled upon the idea of having a martial arts tournament as a way to publicize one of the facets of student life.

"While it has not quite spread all through the kingdom yet, many medium-sized hotels and restaurants own MagiPads, and facilities specifically made to watch magivision are also starting to appear. Many parents are unable to come to the capital due to work or other circumstances, and the academy itself does not allow outsiders to enter the campus at regular times. That means the only times they can see their children are during holiday seasons. There are no doubt many parents out in the countryside worried for their children. Therefore..."

What if their child, who was living a life that even they did not know the specifics of, were to participate in the martial arts tournament? Parents could get even just one moment to see their child's courageous figure. That was what Hildetaura was aiming at.

In other words, since only children would be participating in this tournament, no one strong would make their appearance. That was the part that killed my enthusiasm. *My disappointment is immeasurable...*

This was also making use of the idea we were considering at the start—the idea of audience participation. For the parents, they would become involved just by virtue of their child being shown on-screen. There would be no way they

could resist that unless the family was on bad terms.

“We will manipulate the hearts of our students’ parents in order to raise awareness of magivision, yes? What a schemer you are, Hilde!”

“Nia! Phrasing!” Reliared scolded me.

What point was there in embellishing my words here? Wasn’t this meant to be a place where we could be frank about our opinions?

“It is fine, Relia. What Nia said is not incorrect. In fact, when I was discussing the proposal with the broadcasting station, there were those who made similar comments. ‘Wow, Hilde, you’ve got a heart of black under there.’ That isn’t something you say to a child who is only eight years old. Terrible.”

In all fairness to the staff, taking advantage of the unconditional love a parent has for their child to further one’s goals wasn’t exactly something an eight-year-old should be suggesting either. Not that I could talk. I was even worse about saying things that didn’t suit my age.

“But it is fine. I made sure to say my piece to them,” the princess said, taking a sip of her tea. ““Oh, and is there a problem with that?’ I told them.”

Damn, you go, girl.

“We and the parents both benefit from it so why even say something like that? They get to see their children more, and we promote magivision even further. *Is there a problem with that?*”

“If I had to raise anything...it would be that your face right now is really irritating me,” I remarked.

“Yeah, same. Why do you look so smug? You came up with it with the staff at the broadcasting station, right? Not like you thought it up yourself. And anyway, Nia was the one who had the idea to begin with.”

“Wow, you both certainly have guts,” Hildetaura said.

When Reliared and I continued to look at Hildetaura with disdain, she cleared her throat to dispel the unpleasant atmosphere. “Well... Well, either way, we’ve already started moving the proposal forward, so we just need your assistance.”

Ah, so the planning was already done, was it? That meant they would be

going ahead with the tournament whether we cooperated or not.

“What exactly do you need us to do?” Reliared asked.

That was indeed a very important question...and one other thing.

“If you need a lot of our time, adjusting our existing schedules might prove difficult,” I added.

Both the Listons and the Silvers had commenced their recording. As much as I had said that I would assist Hildetaura with her endeavors, that did not suddenly make it okay to neglect recording for my own domain.

“What we essentially need to do is attract people to the event. We’ll be the ones to decorate the entrance, so to speak. Make it look appealing enough that heads will turn our way,” Hildetaura explained. “We cannot exactly do anything ourselves once the tournament has begun anyway.”

That was true. I didn’t particularly find myself wanting to enter it either. What would I gain from participating in a *children’s* tournament? Bullying children like that would be in bad taste. I couldn’t do it.

Being the ones to introduce the event to the public would mean that our work would come before the tournament itself. What exactly would she have us do though?

“Are you listening? First...”

An unexpected visit from Hildetaura led to a magivision meeting that went on ‘til late in the evening.

“Now then, Young Mistress, shall we return to the previous topic of discussion?”

Just because Hildetaura had interrupted our talk about the underground arena, that did not mean that our conversation was done, apparently. It had gotten dark outside, but the second our guests had left, Lynokis tried to resume it.

“Let us forget about it for now. I’m tired of talking.”

The sudden meeting had gone on for a surprisingly long time. We could leave

the discussion for another day. I was tired. My brain didn't want to work anymore.

The martial arts tournament was scheduled to take place sooner than I had anticipated. The moment the preparations for the tournament entered full swing, it would be time for our promotional recording. Hildetaura had been considerate of our schedules and organized things so that we could record during lunch or after school. Given how much effort she had put into arranging it all, I felt like I had no choice but to do it. That was exactly why I hadn't been able to relax during the meeting.

As far as physical labor was concerned, I was confident my body could go a whole day easy, but using my brain was an entirely different matter. I was very likely a punch first, ask questions later kind of person in my past life. So I was being serious when I said I was exhausted. I had yet to practice my forms, but I was desperate for a chance to rest for a minute.

However, Lynokis's response was harsh. "No. You should finish discussing important matters quickly and concisely."

I could tell how determined she was to stop me from going to the arena.

"You can call it an important matter, but I'm going regardless, you know."

"I don't recall approving."

Tch, what a stubborn student... Time to try intimidation tactics. As her teacher.

"A student has no right to overturn their master's decisions!" I yelled at her, eyes wide open.

Lynokis's eyes widened back. "You are the daughter of the Liston family before you are my master! I cannot let you go somewhere unsuitable for someone of your standing!"

That was the one argument I couldn't counter. The argument was like an invisible wall towering over me, so tall it even pierced the clouds. My student was strong... She so easily countered her master's anger.

Words would not win me this battle.

“In the first place, to continue from what we were saying before Her Highness arrived, how do you even intend to make it into an illegal place like an underground arena? You said you already had a plan, yes? Do you have someone conspiring with you?”

Hm...

“Not yet. I intend to persuade someone to help. So how about this, Lynokis?”

“No.”

“If the negotiations go as planned, let me go to the arena.”

“No.”

“If the negotiations don’t go as planned, I’ll give up. Completely give up, no halfway compromise. I promise you.”

“No. Give up now.”

“At least try and listen to me! You’re already planning to refuse no matter what I say!”

“Because I don’t need to hear what you have to say! No means no!”

This was what it meant to have no leg to stand on. Why was my student so strong? *You sly little dog, you. You had tricks other than crying and begging after all!*

I would say yes and she would say no. That childish back-and-forth continued late into the night until our mouths became dry.

I woke up the next day in a state of disbelief that I’d had such a horrific night as a six-year-old child with a past life. But regardless.

“No. You definitely can’t.”

Even through finishing my morning routine, getting my things ready for class, picking up my bag, leaving the dorms, and heading to school, Lynokis was *still* insistently telling me I could not go as she trailed behind me.

I won’t lie—I started to feel like I was going to give in to her persistence. Not that I would. In the realm of martial arts, it would take a miracle to make me give in. The only place servants were allowed to accompany children was

outside the schoolhouse. They weren't allowed inside.

"You definitely can't go, okay?!"

Despite the curious gazes watching us as we walked to school, Lynokis refused to let up while I refused to acknowledge her as I walked into the building. We'd ended up standing out so early in the morning, but there was no way to avoid it.

"What's up? What's going on?" Someone who wasn't Lynokis whispered to me, and that was when I finally turned around. It was Relia. She seemed to have been walking a little behind but had come running up when she heard Lynokis's fierce insistence.

"Just a slight difference in opinion, that's all," I said, answering as vaguely as possible.

"Ahh, I see." Relia nodded. "So what you're saying is that it's your fault."

Why was she able to reach that conclusion so confidently? I hadn't told her a thing. Well, even being generous, the conflict was a hundred percent my fault.

"Anyway, you arrived just in time. I have something I wanted to ask you," I said, brushing off her comment.

"I'm not helping you with anything shady."

"I haven't even said anything yet."

"But you're totally thinking of something crazy right now, aren't you? Something that would hurt people, or humiliate them, or make them bleed. That's what your attendant's trying to push you away from, right? Give up."

Just what image did this girl have of me? I...would not deny that I indeed considered those kinds of things. But that only took up my thoughts for, at most, sixty percent of the day.

"All I wanted was to go see your sister," I replied.

"My sis? Like...Ririmi?"

"Yes."

I hadn't seen Ririmi Silver since the day of the physical exams. The dormitories and school buildings for the middle and high schools were pretty far away from

the elementary school ones, but they were still on the same campus. It wasn't impossible to go pay them a visit if I wanted to.

Though, it felt a little awkward going to meet her after we had so thoroughly defeated the instructor who was essentially her master.

"Well, she *did* say that she wanted to meet with you again, so..."

"Then that's perfect!"

"That smile of yours is making me nervous."

So rude!

"You aren't trying to get her involved in anything bad, are you? You can be crazy, but you're not *that* crazy, right?"

"Of course not."

"Really? We're right before the martial arts tournament; this is an important time. You're not going to cause any unnecessary commotion, are you?"

"I'm not."

"I...really can't trust you."

And again, she was so rude. Really so rude. So disrespectful!

But much easier to handle than Lynokis. Lynokis would reject the notion so thoroughly that you wouldn't be able to call it a conversation. The fact this was not a one-sided rejection meant there was a way to persuade Reliared.

As easy as taking candy from a baby!

And so, I used all the free time in the school day to pester Reliared to let me meet with Ririmi after school.

That was the first hurdle cleared. That meant I'd made it one step closer to the Umbral Arena.

It had been more than two weeks since the semester had started. Reliared, Hildetaura, and I were all very busy with our magivision work. Still, that didn't mean we were completely devoid of free time, and as such, Reliared had committed to joining the Heavenstriker club. It appeared part of it was so she

could try and catch up with her sister though.

After taking the time to thoroughly convince Reliared, I managed to get her to bring me with her to her club activities after school. The one I had business with technically wasn't her sister, but she didn't need to know that.

Thankfully, the attendant so keen to reject my desires would remain at the dorm until I returned, so I had a bit of leeway after class. Though if I took too long, she would absolutely come search for me. I wouldn't have enough time to leave campus, but if it was just a quick detour within the school grounds, I could surely manage that without raising suspicion. And so, I went with Reliared to the dojo where the Heavenstriker students were training.

"Do you really not want to join us? Don't you train in martial arts or something?" Reliared asked.

"Yes, but I have no need to join."

So far, I hadn't met anyone that I felt was strong enough I could learn anything from, and that wasn't restricted to the Heavenstriker style. There was no reason for me to join a club.

"But you're interested, aren't you?"

The Heavenstriker club was where that boulder of a man was the instructor. With a body like that, you could punch him with a decent amount of force and he wouldn't break. On paper, that was very attractive.

"Ah, you just thought of something violent again, didn't you?" Reliared said flatly.

"No?"

How did she know? How did she know I was envisioning sending the instructor flying? We'd only known each other for a few weeks... Was I *that* easy to read? Was I easier to read than I thought?

We left the schoolhouse, chatting as we headed in the opposite direction of the dorms. I had never gone this way before, but apparently there were buildings for the clubs scattered about around the vast campus grounds. The Heavenstriker dojo was no different; students of all ages gathered there to

learn the style.

“How is the Heavenstriker style then? Is it fun?” I asked.

“Why do I feel like you’re talking down to me?”

I couldn’t help it! Even if we looked the same age now, I had a whole previous life under my belt.

“Just gonna remind you that my attendant is definitely way stronger than yours,” Reliared added.

Oh right, I forgot we were pretending that Lynokis was my master and not the other way around. That meant I was, on the surface, in the same situation as Reliared. I wanted to find an opportunity to let the two attendants duke it out at some point, but I needed to prioritize the underground arena first. Their fight could come later.

“I just realized that you’ve never told me what style you use,” Reliared said.

“Who knows? I’ve never really thought about it.”

“But it’s not the Heavenstriker style, ri— Ah.”

Ah?

Reliared gave me a very serious look. “Nia, don’t say anything unnecessary. Don’t suddenly punch anyone or get violent *at all*. You’re forbidden, okay?”

Huh? What’s this all about? Oh...that’s what it’s about.

“I don’t have much time, though.”

If I wasn’t quick, Lynokis would come looking for me.

“I don’t care. Just hold back, okay?”

As we stood there chatting, six boys armed with wooden swords surrounded us.

They must have been waiting to ambush us.

There wasn’t even a hint of murderous intent or hostility, so from afar, the predicament most likely looked like a regular gathering of children. Given our difference in stature, these boys had to be at least third-or fourth-years; they

were pretty big compared to us. It didn't change the fact that they were still kids, though.

"Relia, quit your stupid Heavenstriker style and come to our swordsmanship dojo," one boldly commanded. He appeared to be the leader.

So they were trying to poach her, were they? Have her quit the Heavenstriker style and force her to join their club instead—that kind of thing?

"Do you know these boys?" I asked.

"I...wouldn't quite say that. I guess you could say they're like students of the instructor's rival," Reliared explained. "I've bumped into them quite a few times here."

In other words, they had no direct relationship, but they were here because of their instructor.

"Lugene! That's Nia! Nia Liston!"

"I know, I'm not blind! I can see her granny hair!"

The boys were muttering among themselves just as Reliared and I were. I really had become more famous than I'd realized. When I gave them a little wave, they immediately went, "Whoa, it's really her!" in amazement. My popularity truly was greater than I'd thought.

But this leader of theirs, Lugene... I really wished he had phrased his comment about my hair differently. He could have at least called it "white hair." I may be old at heart, but my physical age was the sprightly young age of six.

"Perfect! Nia, you should come join us with Relia!"

Now they were trying to scout me too? When Lugene suddenly raised such a suggestion, the five boys with him all started getting excited. *Oh my, it certainly doesn't feel bad being so desired.*

"I'm not part of the Heavenstriker school, so I'll pass," I told them.

"We don't mind!"

What a beautifully refreshing response. But I *did* mind.

"Lugene, can you please give it a rest for today? Nia has nothing to do with

this.” Reliared stood in front of me, as if trying to protect me. My, such a small child was trying her best to keep me safe. I had felt my heart flutter when Neal would speak up in my defense, but it wasn’t bad having Reliared stand up for me either. She was incredibly gallant but also cute. It made me want to give her an allowance.

“Just to be clear, I’m saying this for your sake. You’d be better off not getting involved with her.”

Hm?

“This girl’s dangerous,” she continued. “Like really dangerous.”

Um.

“Relia?”

I had thought it cute that she was protecting me, but was it...actually the other way around? Was she protecting them from me?

“Hurry up and go. Before you end up making an enemy out of her.”

“Relia, are you listening to me?”

“Leave now while I’m holding her back.”

“Hello? Relia?”

“Why are you still here?! Hurry up and go!”

“Hey.”

There was no room for doubt anymore, surely. She was protecting *them*, wasn’t she? I hadn’t even let loose in front of Reliared. Why was *this* her opinion of me?

She... She wasn’t *wrong*, I supposed. If I hadn’t been here, then this situation would be a lone young girl surrounded by six armed boys. That wasn’t something that one following the martial way could simply overlook. There was all the justification in the world to educate them with an iron fist. In a sense, her assessment was correct.

If this was Reliared trying to get the situation under control, then I didn’t mind. I would have considered this a childish dispute even if these boys had

been grown-ups. Fights between children weren't exactly something I enjoyed being involved in.

"I don't know what you're talking about and I don't care. Come with us!" came Lugene's eloquent rebuttal. Was he as much of a brick wall as Lynokis? "The Heavenstriker style is super weak anyway!"

At least we agreed on that front. That style had been nothing but disappointment for me. I hadn't met a single strong Heavenstriker practitioner. Did any even exist in the first place?

"Heavenstriker even lost that match during the physical exams! And the opponent was weaponless too, so there's no excuse!"

That was an undeniable truth, and it was all because my student was the opponent.

"You would be stronger if you joined us! Why would you choose such a weak style?"

Exactly. If she really wanted to get stronger, she should leave the Heavenstriker school entirely. The boy was saying my thoughts exactly.

I couldn't tell what Reliared was thinking given I could only see her back—what with her trying to protect the boys—but was there a student out there who *wouldn't* be angered if their master or their style was being mocked?

At least, that was what I thought.

But it seemed as if Lugene's words—which had been fired so rapidly there was no time for her to retort—had so very precisely stabbed a sore spot for Reliared. After all, there was no denying that his words were true.

However, the brute continued...

"Why even fight with your bare hands to begin with?! It's obvious that fighting with a weapon is superior!"

Those were the words that I couldn't ignore.

"Excuse me." I pushed Reliared aside and stepped forward.

"Ah— Hey, I told you not to do this!" Reliared protested in a futile attempt to

stop me.

“Say what you want about the Heavenstriker style. I don’t disagree,” I said to the leader. “But I can’t ignore you mocking all weaponless styles.”

Fighting with a weapon was superior? What nonsense. The weapon had nothing to do with strength; what mattered was how much skill the person had, which fighter had trained closer to their limits.

“What is this all about anyway? Do you think you look tough surrounding a little girl while brandishing some big wooden sticks?” Now that I had stepped forward, I wasn’t going to let things end like this. “I’ll get really mad depending on what you say, so I advise you to give your reply some thought.”

Depending on his answer, I may teach him a little lesson to correct his twisted adamanace.

“W-We came to have a match!” Lugene stuttered out.

It appeared once I broke my quiet, observational stance, Lugene sensed something in me that was unbecoming of a child, and it was making him waver. *This boy seems to have good battle instincts. He could end up quite strong under the right master.*

“A match? What for?” The boys were all uncomfortably silent, so I asked again, to Reliared instead.

“Only two of them challenged me at first, but I fought them off. And each time they try again, they come with one more,” she explained.

A six-year-old girl had managed to beat a bunch of older, armed boys? Perhaps she had quite the promising future ahead of her. At this age, battles were less about one’s martial prowess and more often about numbers or whatever weapons they had.

“You’re quite the strong one, aren’t you, Relia?”

“Well, of course! You might be a bit stronger than me right now, but one day I’ll definitely defeat— Hey, why are you looking at me like that? Are you making fun of me?!”

“I’m not. I was just thinking of how adorable you are.”

“That’s basically laughing at me!”

In a broad sense, yes, she was right, but my intention was entirely different.

“Anyway, I understand roughly what’s going on now.” I ignored the angry Reliared and turned back to the boys. “You over there. Just a moment ago, you said that fighting with a weapon was superior, yes? Could you take up a stance?”

Lugene couldn’t hide the hesitation he felt being faced with me. “Huh?”

“And you can drop it now.”

Before he could react to my words or movements, Lugene’s wooden sword was spiraling far away into the air.

You can drop it now, because I’ve already kicked it.

I’d simply performed a front kick from directly in front of him, and a relatively slow one at that. From the boys’ reactions, none of their eyes had been able to keep up. Honestly, though, I really hadn’t moved *that* fast.

“Well? You said wielding a weapon was superior, yes? What will you do now that you’ve lost your precious weapon?”

Normally, that would be where I started nagging and lecturing. I would make sure they knew just how beautiful and strong one’s bare hands were, what flexible and aggressive tactics they allowed, that mere tools such as weapons shouldn’t be relied on when even holy swords and demon blades were so feeble they could be easily shattered, that whether or not muscle betrayed you was entirely down to you, yourself. I would use all words possible if it would make my opponent aware of this.

But I really was running out of time, so this simple demonstration would suffice for now. If they’d been adults, I would’ve gotten in two or three more follow-up punches, but raising my hand against children didn’t feel right. They didn’t seem particularly hostile or harmful, so I was content with this resolution.

Also, Lynokis would find me right away if I stayed in such an open area for too long. My white hair would absolutely stand out from afar. I had to hurry and get to the Heavenstriker dojo.

Reliared was standing there just as stunned as the boys, dazed and clueless as to what had happened, but I took the girl's hand and walked away. She...flinched a little when I did so, perhaps because she remembered how tightly I had gripped it last time. *I'm sorry. I won't do that again, I swear.*

"Wait."

Before we could be on our way, someone else interrupted.

"Sano?!" one of the boys shouted.

The approaching boy was still in his school uniform and was noticeably larger than even the boys who surrounded us. He appeared to be in middle school. Since the boys instantly knew who he was, they must have been acquainted. Perhaps they were from the same dojo? He had a wooden sword with him, after all.

Though this Sano fellow naturally still had a bit of a baby face, his features were more defined than one would expect. He paid the nearby boys no mind and instead looked right at me. He was rather handsome, but he still had a long way to go if he wanted to beat my brother in the looks department.

"Name's Sanowil Badr. I'm still in middle school, but I help teach these kids at the dojo."

So Sanowil was his name. It seemed like it would be worth remembering.

"I saw your kick a second ago," he continued. "I'd love to have a match with you."

Wonderful.

Though by all appearances he was still inexperienced and weak, I felt he was still a martial warrior in his own right. Despite his clear cockiness, it was hard to ignore that he had the spirit of one of our kind. Being challenged directly to a match like this was the true desire of any martial artist. It was even better that his challenge was inspired by seeing my kick. The outcome was obvious, but it was hard to dislike someone like him. He was a type of person that could serve as a satisfactory opponent.

"Nia, this is bad," Reliared frantically whispered in my ear. "Sanowil Badr is

the reigning champion of the swordsmanship division of the martial arts tournament. You might be strong, but even you can't beat him."

Hmm, so it was possible to win the tournament looking like that. At that level. I see... Hm. *That's fine, to be honest. It's a kids' martial arts tournament, after all.*

Right now is terrible timing though.

"I don't mind having a match with you, but I don't have much time. If we're going to do this, we need to do it right here, right now."

"Hang on! I just said you can't! You stop too, Sanowil!" Reliared frantically jumped in, except this time, it likely was to protect me.

How cute. I'll give her some pennies later. Though, no matter how hard she tried, I wouldn't stop. If a martial artist challenges you to a match, then it is a martial artist's duty to accept. If there was no reason to refuse, then I was bound to accept the challenge.

"If you're willing to lose in front of your students, then battle me right here," I said.

Sanowil said nothing, responding only by raising his sword. The air grew taut. The casual atmosphere from a moment ago had been replaced by a heavy pressure. Even Reliared could do nothing other than remain quiet.

The tension would only last for a few quick seconds though.

"Will this satisfy you?"

"Ngh?!"

This time, I moved a little quicker. I took one step forward and, upon reaching the appropriate distance, swung down my knifehand. I cut Sanowil's sword straight down the middle before he could even move from his sword stance.

To Sanowil, it must have looked like I suddenly appeared in front of him. He frantically jumped back before realizing it was already too late for his sword.

"Here you go," I said, throwing back the half I'd cut off while he stared in disbelief at his bisected weapon. "That's enough, right? If you'll excuse me."

Silence fell over the area.

It was probably impossible for them to accept, process, or understand what they had just seen. But that wasn't for me to spell out for them. I grabbed Reliared, who once again jumped at the motion, and this time headed to the dojo for real.

"What was that?! What in heaven was that?!"

It appeared Reliared had finally registered the results of my demonstrations as I dragged her into the dojo.

"Good afternoon," I said as I entered.

"Don't ignore me!"

Heh, thank you for guiding me here, Reliared. Now it's my turn.

Ignoring Reliared's outburst, I entered the dojo and was met with the sight of many of the students warming up, the instructor who was built like a rock sitting upright like a statue nearby. Reliared's sister, Ririmi, didn't appear to be here yet.

Oh well. It was that man that I really had business with, anyway.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr. Instructor."

Upon hearing my raised voice, the students who hadn't noticed my presence turned to look at me.

"NIA LISTON?!" But most importantly, the instructor's response was loud and intense. "Is your attendant here?! I would like to challenge her to a rematch!" He came lumbering over towards me with loud footsteps, passing right by me as he frantically scanned the area for Lynokis.

As expected, that match at the club fair wasn't one he had forgotten. Good. That was exactly how a martial warrior should be. Whether you lost once, twice, or a hundred times, you should continue to fight until you get a result you are satisfied with. You can continue to fight so long as your perseverance does not die out. The only true defeat is when your spirit completely breaks.

"I haven't brought her with me today," I told him.

“Oh, I... I see... I see. Oh...”

He was so disappointed. *Pull yourself together. Don't sulk so much in front of your students. Don't droop your shoulders like that. Don't curl into yourself either. Students are more observant of their master than you think.*

It would be for the best if I changed the topic as soon as possible. Thanks to my earlier confrontation, I really didn't have much time.

“I came because I have a request. May I have a bit of your time?”

A large sigh from the instructor followed my question. “A request, huh...?”

Please pull yourself together. I'm begging you. My chance to go to the Umbral Arena relies on you.

“Where did you hear that name?”

I chased away Reliared—regardless of how insistent she was to stay—by promising her that I would teach her how to cut a wooden sword in half with her bare hands, then followed the instructor around the side of the dojo. He tried to convince me to join the Heavenstriker school, but given I was in a rush, I immediately got to the heart of the matter.

The moment the instructor heard me mention the Umbral Arena, however, his look of disappointment immediately darkened. I grinned at the man and his grim expression.

I knew it. He does know.

“You've been scouted before, have you not?” I asked.

If you were a gangster or a martial artist with any modicum of skill, the underground would find its way to you. It was with that assumption that I had visited him today, and it seemed I was right on the mark.

“Answer my question. Where did you hear about the Umbral Arena? That isn't something children should know.”

“At a certain bar.” That was also where I had been told how to get there—the key was this man.

“A-A bar? You’re six years old and you’re going to a *bar*?”

Seeing the look of great shock on such a large grown-up reminded me once more that I was in fact a six-year-old child doing considerably abnormal things for someone of my age, but I didn’t care about that right now.

“My circumstances are... No, I have the same feelings as you.”

“The same feelings?”

“I want to meet those who are strong. Preferably, those who are stronger than me.”

Just a few moments ago, the instructor had been searching for Lynokis—that had to have been due to a desire to face off against a strong foe. My desire was not so different from his. However, the one big difference was that those who could actually best me were few and far between. That was exactly why I so desperately wanted to go to the arena.

“Apparently, they’re going to hold a knockout tournament soon. It’s very likely that someone strong will be there. I want to see that person. Don’t you feel the same?”

“W-Well, I’d be lying if I said no, but...”

But of course. Those who follow the martial way cannot hear of the powerful, cannot hear of a master of their art, and not feel their blood boiling.

“Mr. Instructor.”

“The name’s Gandolph, kid.”

“Gandolph, I won’t beat around the bush. Take me to the Umbral Arena.”

“Come on, it should be obvious that’s impossible. That isn’t somewhere I can take a little girl. And you’re an aristocrat to boot. You should be avoiding such dangerous places.”

I’d had enough of those model answers already. I’d already heard plenty of refusal from Lynokis. I was sick of it. I was asking this while being perfectly aware of my station, you clueless dolts.

“It’s fine, just take me. Take me as your daughter.”

“Daughter... Daughter?! Mine?!”

Yes, *this* was the strategy Anzel had raised for getting me into the arena. To put it simply, if I attended as a friend or relative of one of their patrons, I could walk right through the front door.

“You’re training your daughter to become a prodigious martial artist, so you’re bringing her to the arena to observe and learn. That’s all the story has to be.”

“No, no, no, you’re insane! This is impossible from start to finish! I’m not going to help you with something so reckless!”

Of course he would refuse. Any sane adult would. Who would ever agree to such a proposal? If I couldn’t even get the young, lax master of a bar to serve alcohol to a child, how could I get a *martial artist* to take me to an illegal arena? It was a hard ask.

“If you take me with you, I’ll show you how you can get one step stronger than you are right now,” I proposed.

“That isn’t the problem here—”

“Prepare yourself. If I can’t convince you with my words, I’ll convince you with my fists.”

“Like I just said, that isn’t the problem here.”

“Do you not want to become strong? Do you not seek power?”

The lure of such words for a martial artist could sometimes even outweigh the tempting seduction of one’s lover. The more one was entrenched in martial arts, the more of an influence such an offer would have.

I’m targeting something that would serve as even my own weak point. There’s no way it won’t have the same effect on someone walking a similar path. In fact, I secretly wanted the same thing to happen to me one day. “Do you seek power?” I wanted to be asked.

From the silence, I could tell it was having an effect on Gandolph. Those magic words had caught him in their grasp, tight enough to leave him unable to speak.

“Why don’t we have one little spar? You can see with your own eyes what I

can do, and if it appeals to you, you can accept my offer. If you don't want what I can do, then I'll give up. How does that sound?"

"All right, fine." Gandolph accepted. "Come at me with whatever you've got. But if I'm disappointed, you'd better give up. And let me have a rematch with your attendant."

Why of course, anything you wish, good sir. The moment the conditions were accepted, the fight was over.

Gandolph faced me and entered a fighting stance. Seeing that, I instantly saw he was lacking. "You're not bad, but I don't know if I'd call you good either," I remarked. It was a posture that left few openings and made it clear that he was experienced. It wasn't a skill someone could obtain overnight. Though his muscles were like chiseled stone, his stance was more like solid steel.

But that was all.

A mere lump of steel is a brittle thing.

"Huh?!"

Right before Gandolph's eyes, as he remained perfectly alert, I casually got up close and tapped his back. He jumped up and away as if shot, then got back into position, his composure clearly shaken.

My speed, my usage of my presence, my footwork, my body movements, all of them far exceeded Gandolph's expectations of me. That was why he couldn't manage an appropriate response.

"I don't have much time, so I'll touch you only once more. That should be enough to convince you, yes?" Just once more should do it. He wasn't such a beginner that he couldn't determine a difference in strength.

Gandolph gulped. It appeared he understood; the moment he had accepted my challenge, the result was clear.

The job placed on him was a heavy responsibility.

Three men sat in the back room of a cheap bar where villains often gathered. Nastine, the negotiator, sat at the table, as his escort, Dao Feita, watched from

against the wall. Both were dressed in black. They were coordinators of the Umbral Arena.

And finally, there was the adventurer who sat opposite Nastine...Asuma Hinoki.

“Can I find strong warriors there?”

“But of course. In a city as fine as Altoire where its underbelly is undetectable, there is only one place where the strong gather: the Umbral Arena.”

Asuma was dangerous. Nastine had seen many villains in his time, including those of the more nefarious variety, but even so, simply sitting across from this man left him sweating. The man before him was an adventurer also known as the Kenki, the Sword Demon. Being face-to-face with him now, Nastine perfectly understood why he had been given such a title.

This man was *dangerous*. He was so used to killing that the act itself held no significance to him anymore. He could probably kill as easily as breathing, whether the foe was a monster or a person. Of course, such villains weren't rare, but it was a different story when they came equipped with real power. Those who could do dangerous things and those who embodied danger itself were two completely different beasts.

This man was no doubt the latter.

“If you wish to meet powerful combatants, then please do come by the arena. We always welcome strong participants, such as yourself.”

There was a small-time gangster known as Nehilga who was especially good at these kinds of negotiations, but he'd disappeared from Altoire along with a gang of youngsters about a year ago. It wasn't uncommon for your average thug to go missing overnight, so it didn't take long for people to stop caring—Nastine was very aware that he was likely the only one who still did. Because Nehilga had dropped off the face of the island, there was no one left to force the duty of negotiation onto.

“Is killing allowed at this Umbral Arena of yours?”

As those words made apparent, the Kenki was thirsting for blood; it wasn't as simple as being unbothered by killing. Why was this man allowed to roam free?

What was the country *doing*? Adventurers were clearly even more dangerous than some small-time bad guys. *God, let me go home already. I want to run a nice hot bath and just drink a barrel of ale. Get so drunk I can't even remember any of this.*

Nastine made sure not a single one of those thoughts showed on his face.

"Murder is not forbidden, but we do ask that you try to keep it to a minimum."

"Huh? You call me here and yet you're saying I can't kill?"

"Dealing with the aftermath is troublesome, you see." In reality, Nastine was trying to say that he couldn't guarantee the Kenki would get out unscathed if he dared kill someone in this city, even if it was in an illegal arena, but he wasn't sure if his full meaning got across.

"Hmph. I see Altoire's peace-loving reputation is present in the underworld, as well."

What's wrong with loving peace? Nastine couldn't help but internally snap back. *If everyone were as dangerous as you, the world would be mad.*

"But from your wording, you don't care if I *do* kill, right? I aim to consume the strong so that I myself can become stronger. That is why I wield a sword."

It wasn't a string of logic that Nastine particularly understood. Just killing people alone wouldn't make you stronger. As someone who tended to be the brains of the operation, he couldn't comprehend the thought processes of meatheads drowning in their search for power.

"But...I will concede that I don't particularly make it a habit to torture the weak either." The Kenki turned his gaze to Dao Feita in the back. "I will kill those as strong as your man back there. Any weaker, I let them live. How does that sound?"

"Fine." Upon that question, it was Dao who answered. "We'll inform you of the details later. Let's go, Nastine."

The negotiations had been resolved without the negotiator.

"Dao, I must ask that you do not proceed with agreements like that ahead of

me,” Nastine admonished as the two made their way out of the bar, Dao walking straight past him.

Though the pair were both staff of the Umbral Arena, they were simply acquaintances. This was their first time working together. Nastine wasn’t entirely sure what kind of person Dao was, only that he was one of his boss’s bodyguards.

Negotiation was in Nastine’s job description; he had been personally asked by the aristocrat in charge of the arena to do this. Had it been a year earlier, he imagined it would’ve been Nehilga who was asked, but that aside, the know-how of regulations and potential concessions one could make in negotiations had been drilled into his head. Nehilga was the kind to make his deals through brute force and improvisation, but Nastine was the type to extensively prepare in advance. That was why he couldn’t approve of his bodyguard interfering with his work.

But Dao made no attempt to understand. “Don’t worry about it.” He loosened his tie in annoyance. “We’re the stronger ones here. If he causes any problems, we’ll deal with him.”

“Who is this ‘we’...?”

But Nastine realized the answer as soon as he had asked the question.

This “we” was the Qilong, a small group of elite assassins.

Altoire was so lacking in military might that it was known around the world as naively peace-loving. It had made them the target of foreign mafias multiple times in the past. The Qilong had always been at the forefront of any altercations or in control of such foreign groups. They had destroyed over ten organizations and had been involved in the assassinations of many important figures. Anyone with knowledge of the underworld was aware of how dangerous they were.

Nastine had started to suspect it, but it seemed that Dao was one of them. Both “Dao” and “Qilong” were names that sounded indigenous to Wu Haitong, so surely it was the case. He had never confirmed that, and he didn’t intend to. Quite frankly, he didn’t want to dig too deep. But he wasn’t mistaken; he was sure of it.

The business side was Nastine's forte. He was one of the brainier members of the mafia. Nothing good would come from digging into a group like that. He certainly wouldn't risk his life on it.

"Well, I'm relying on you if anything happens then."

Nastine wasn't completely happy with the outcome, but for all intents and purposes, the negotiations had been a success. The Kenki was dangerous, but so was the Qilong. If anything happened, he could just let the fighters battle it out.

"But that sword..." Dao muttered.

"What about it?"

The Kenki was an adventurer. He'd been armed at the negotiating table with a curved blade.

"Tell the boss that his sword ain't normal. There's something sinister about it," the assassin warned.

"Hm...? All right, I'll make sure to tell him."

"Such a sinister weapon only calls even darker forces to it."

Nastine didn't quite understand what was going on, but Dao's muttered words sent shivers up his spine, regardless. Having been part of this world for so long, he'd heard plenty of empty threats that led to nothing, but these words strangely lingered in his mind.

He had a really bad feeling.

Anzel

A young man who had previously worked as a hired bodyguard for the mafia. After losing to Nia time and time again, he lost his will to fight and retired from his bodyguard role. He eventually settled down as a bartender.

Age:

20 years old

Title/Occupation:

Ex-mafia bodyguard;
newly reformed bartender

Favored fighting style:

“My attuned weapon. It’s a metal rod.”

What are your thoughts about Nia after fighting her?

“She’s so powerful I don’t even know if she’s human.”

Are you in a relationship with Fressa?

“Nah, she’s just an old acquaintance that I get along with.”

“Oi, don’t do this in my bar... This isn’t some hostess club.”



Chapter 5: The Martial Arts Tournament and a Review Meeting

The project we had secretly been working on was finally made public. The school had been alive with rumors that we had deliberately spread, but finally we could make our move.

“I repeat. In two weeks’ time, we will be holding a martial arts tournament for the elementary and middle schools. The tournament will be aired on magivision across the Kingdom of Altoire. Registration will run for one week starting today.”

The third princess Hildetaura announced the martial arts tournament not only to the academy but also to the whole kingdom, with the school gates serving as her backdrop.

“Even though I knew this was her plan, I still think this is a really bold way to announce it,” Lynokis whispered to me. I agreed. Incidentally, neither of us had brought up the Umbral Arena since our initial clash, so on the surface, we seemed as normal as ever.

The announcement occurred while many of the other girls in my dorm and I were eating breakfast in the first floor cafeteria. There were those who had made their preparations so that they could go straight to school the moment they were done eating, those who intended to return to their room first before they left, and those who weren’t even changed yet.

Usually, the cafeteria was a boisterous place, but today was different.

Their princess schoolmate was currently announcing a school event on magivision—it was not something they could ignore. The cafeteria was suddenly filled with the sound of Hildetaura once more announcing the martial arts tournament as the chatter around the room quieted.

Reliared and I had already been told in advance that this was how Hildetaura intended to make the announcement, but actually watching it happen...there

was something *off* about it all. Maybe it was because such event announcements weren't the norm, or maybe it was because the event would allow outsiders to see into what were usually restricted grounds. It felt like we were proudly announcing a private event to the public, something that felt wrong to declare so openly. I couldn't quite express my feelings properly.

However, it seemed Lynokis felt the same strange indescribable sense of unease as I did. If the plan was a misstep though, there was nothing we could do about it now. It wasn't as if we could take it back now that it had aired.

Besides, the purpose of this whole thing was to popularize magivision by letting parents see what their children were getting up to at school. Perhaps the announcement felt strange because that target audience was so restrictive. Usually, the goal of the programs we aired was to entertain any and all viewers, but this announcement was aimed specifically at the academy and those who were related to the students, so maybe that was where the unease lay...

But what was the point in lingering on this?

Our activities to try and promote magivision would only continue, which meant announcements like this would continue in the future. Both the viewers and those of us sitting comfortably in the norm would get used to the changes eventually. Who cared if I felt something was off about it in the moment? Things would be much worse if we failed to advertise sufficiently.

"Nia, Nia! What's this about a martial arts tournament?!"

Oh my. Apparently Hildetaura had announced that Reliared and I would be involved in the preparations as well.

"We will be making further announcements later, so look forward to it. It'd be boring if we spelled it all out at once, no?" I said to placate the children excitedly pressing me for answers, so I could finish my meal in peace.

"Nia! Relia!"

Our part to play began during our lunch break. We would often record for our own territories' broadcasting companies after school, so the only times we could guarantee we would be available were lunchtime or the early mornings.

Hildetaura waved at us as she called our names from where she waited by the school gates. She had cleverly thought of something we would be able to do during this small period of time.

When we approached the princess, there was something strange that immediately caught our attention.

“Um... What’s with the crew?” Reliared slowly asked, just as surprised as I was.

“Regular production crews are considered outsiders to the school. Therefore...”

Therefore, she had cobbled together a crew of students to facilitate our recordings. It was true that even the royal capital’s own production crew wasn’t ordinarily allowed on school grounds, since they weren’t considered staff. As far as the academy was concerned, they were part of the general public.

Each of our territories’ production crews was made up of adults. Though Bendelio and his distinctive face did appear on magivision, he was originally a director. Even the cameramen and the makeup artists were adults. And yet, the group holding different pieces of equipment around Hildetaura were most certainly not adults. In fact, they were blatantly wearing school uniforms. They *had* to be students, either from the middle or high school.

In other words, they were an improvised production crew gathered on short notice so we could do recordings on campus.

“I have been a part of real productions long enough to have at least picked up the basics. As long as we keep things simple, I believe I should be fine. On the topic, we have already gained permission for the capital’s production crew to enter school grounds for the tournament, so there is no need to worry about that.”

Well, that was good to know, at least, but that didn’t change that our present situation was an issue. Our little gathering of youths was clearly tense with nerves. Their faces were stiff and they were abnormally sweaty. The hands and shoulders holding the equipment were quivering, and there was even a boy frantically muttering to himself, “I can do it, I can do it...!” while staring intently at some faraway point.

The sight was making Reliared herself nervous too, and Hildetaura's smile was most definitely forced.

No, no, quit it, Nia. If I kept thinking like that, we'd get nowhere. I didn't need to ask or confirm—it was because things weren't all right that we were concerned. The more important a fight to the death was to you, the more imperative it was to remain calm and act as if everything was normal. If you didn't, there was no way you'd be able to bring forth your true potential, and you would die a pitiful death. Nothing was more mortifying than that.

"Let's just take it easy," I said, parroting the words that Bendelio would always say before a recording.

Let's take it nice and easy, guys, 'kay?

Though his distinctive face might make him look suspicious, Bendelio's carefree smile and encouraging words would always clear any unnecessary tension at a shoot, and the terrified locals would quickly relax.

"Postproduction will be able to stitch something together with whatever footage we manage to get here today, so it's okay if we mess up. In fact, let's go at it expecting to fail. Mistakes make for invaluable learning experiences," I tried to say encouragingly.

Silence.

Did... Did it do anything? Well, it was okay if they didn't quite feel comfortable with it yet. It was one of those things you got used to with time.

"Time is precious, so shall we get going? Hilde, where would you like to start?"

Our job was to go around the dojos on campus and interview the students who would be participating in the tournament and their instructors. We had to build up everyone's expectations as much as possible before the big day.

I was already worried that our production crew was too inexperienced, but the time restrictions were also a massive issue.

"You remember the questions, yes?" Hildetaura asked Reliared and me as we

quickly moved through campus.

“There are only four questions, so I memorized them easily,” Reliared confirmed. Same here. We weren’t intending to make this some novel interview or anything; they were just general questions you would expect from something like this, so it wasn’t that hard to memorize them.

We’d prepared four questions that we would make sure to ask the instructors or potential participants:

1. Could you introduce yourself and your martial art?
2. Could you tell us about your hometown?
3. Why would you like to enter the tournament?
4. Do you have anything else you’d like to say to the people at home?

We would ask the four standard questions and then we would come up with any further comments or questions depending on their answers. The time we spent on each person would be short in order to maximize the number of people appearing on magivision.

For the record, there was both a weapon and weaponless division in the tournament. Apparently, if the champions of each division so wished it, they would be allowed to have a match against each other. The participants were either in elementary or middle school, and they were also split into their respective age groups.

The academy held another martial arts tournament each fall known as the Interstyle Assembly. It was this tournament that Ririmi Silver and Sanowil Badr were the runner-up and champion of respectively. Our upcoming tournament would no doubt be seen as a warm-up for that, or it would become a place for us to win the confidence of the people. If we were successful here, we could then broadcast the fall tournament on a much larger scale throughout the kingdom. This tournament could be seen as a stepping stone towards that goal.

If we did it once, it would get easier the second time, especially if we succeeded. The more the viewers approved of us, the easier it would become to carry projects out.

The problem comes if this flops.

I really was worried about this production crew... No, I said I wouldn't think things like that. There was no point begging for something I couldn't receive, and besides, it was a net positive if we managed to establish a production crew among the student body. They would no doubt become an invaluable asset if we wanted to continue promoting magivision while attending the academy.

It was no use worrying over how uneasy I felt about them or how much I did or didn't trust them. If any industry excluded the younger generation, it would only decline. I simply had to accept it for what it was. Rather, we had to be the ones to help train them up. Even if they weren't as proficient as a professional crew, we could at least train them to assist with a production.

I suppose I really should be there to help support them. They'll have to try their best.

The first place we visited was the Alphon Swordsmanship dojo. It was said to be the strongest swordsmanship school at the academy, and they always had the leading candidates for champion at the fall tournament. It also had the most students, so it was the most popular dojo in a literal sense too.

Apparently, everyone was of the opinion that if we were recording for the tournament, we should absolutely start by introducing them first. Though I didn't know the details, it was said to be a school founded by some old hero. If I looked too much into it, it would probably just turn out to be another style like Heavenstriker—a disappointing crowd that failed to live up to their name.

Since it was lunchtime, there were barely any students present.

"Excuse me. May we have a moment of your time?" Hildetaura asked the older man and the boy in dogi who were lightly training. The pair stopped their exercise and walked over.

"Welcome, Your Highness. I am the instructor of this Alphon dojo. Do forgive me for being dressed like this in your presence."

The instructor was small in stature for a martial artist. One wouldn't think this small and slender fighter was strong just by looking at him—but he was. Underneath his dogi, his body was insanely well trained.

Surprisingly, there's someone interesting here after all.

He would still be nothing against me, though. I could win while tying my shoelaces. But that was fair; he seemed the type who was better at teaching than being a master practitioner. As proof of that, the boy silently standing behind him was strong for his age. He would probably be an equal match for Sanowil. That said, I cared about him less than I did a splinter in my finger.

"It's no bother at all. Rather, forgive us for calling you here while you are so busy," Hildetaura politely replied. We had told them in advance that we would be coming to interview them, so Hildetaura must have arranged the time.

"Gazell, thank you for coming, as well."

"I came because my instructor asked, that's all. I'm still busy."

How feisty. The boy behind the instructor even *clicked his tongue* at the princess. I loved it. A spirit that does not yield to authority is befitting of a martial warrior. It was a pity that his strength wasn't quite up to par with his guts.

And then there was Hildetaura. Despite being spoken to in such a way, her smile didn't waver in the slightest. To be honest, I was impressed. Though she was a princess, the way she held herself and her diligence in her work clearly showed how much time she'd devoted to magivision. She was aware she would get nowhere by causing a fuss, and any trouble would only cause issues for the recording.

As for Reliared, she was currently whispering into my ear, "He's being so rude to someone as important as Miss Hilde... Go beat some sense into him, Nia." I really wished she would stop. I wasn't exactly *against* beating people up without an express reason, but I wasn't so narrow-minded as to resort to violence for a little bad-mouthing.

"Gazell."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Hurry up and get this over with. Please." Gazell begrudgingly agreed to be interviewed at his instructor's rebuke.

The rigid production crew finally finished the preparations for recording.

Thank goodness. If they can at least get set up, that's a start. Though I was surprised when the crew awkwardly stood there watching Hildetaura's interactions with the instructor and Gazell. Not a single one of them moved until I told them to get ready. I was *seriously* shocked.

It was fine! There was a lot to learn from mistakes. No one was an expert from the start. They just needed to get used to it. I would do what I could to assist them.

"I would like to introduce the Alphon Swordsmanship dojo, the school that the holy knight Alphon Alphon founded. This is Gazell Brock, a runner-up of last year's Interstyle Assembly, who will be participating in our upcoming tournament."

The interview had begun. When Hildetaura asked the planned questions, Gazell responded with a straight face. His clear moodiness was in complete contrast to Hildetaura's affability, but it gave the vibe of a martial artist, so I couldn't fault him for it. I felt like most martial artists were pretty awkward in social situations.

But Gazell's answers were so short that the whole thing was rather boring. The interview was so brief and uninformative that there was no point to it. There was no reason anyone would want to watch this—or him. Nothing about this interview would build hype.

Upon realizing where my thoughts were going, it occurred to me just how much my time in the magivision industry had affected me. You should seek *martial arts* from a martial artist. You don't seek words from them.

I borrowed a small blackboard from one of the production crew girls standing beside me. I wrote instructions for Hildetaura on it so I didn't audibly interrupt the recording. Hildetaura noticed what I was holding, and though she didn't let it show on her face, there was a moment of hesitant silence...and then she spoke as I instructed.

"You were a close runner-up at last year's tournament, right? Are you aiming for the championship again for this upcoming one?"

That question caused Gazell's look of unhappiness to deepen.

“This time, I will *not* lose to Sanowil Badr. I will absolutely wipe the floor with him.”

That expression is perfect.

It was the twisted face of humiliation you would see on a man who was hell-bent on revenge. Now viewers would see Gazell and Sanowil as rivals and look forward to their match. The responses of a model student were too boring. It was much more fun to watch a deep rivalry developing.

You know...perhaps I really was becoming too influenced by magivision. Bendelio’s teachings were most certainly getting rooted deep inside of me.

Now that Hildetaura had gotten the ball rolling on the interviews, they would continue through the registration week and would be broadcast in the order they were recorded. The footage we took of Gazell was broadcast that evening.

The response was astounding. Every day, the mysterious floating tablets in each dorm projected images and sound from a completely separate place and time. And in those moving pictures, Reliared, Hildetaura, and I—students who attended the same school as them—would frequently appear.

Perhaps because the people appearing felt closer to them as fellow students, the interest in the productions—from the messy school tour to the tournament interviews—was quite high in the elementary school dorms. Many of the aristocrats were used to all of this, but they were vastly outnumbered by the commoners, who otherwise didn’t have magivision access. That was primarily where the interest in all of this was coming from.

Thanks to our hard work, the number of children taking part in the tournament kept increasing. Some were clearly just doing it for a laugh, as they weren’t involved in any club or even dabbling in martial arts, but wanted to be the center of attention. They got carried away and put in their names all because they wanted to appear on magivision and nothing else. Seeing that, I began to think that there had to be other school events beyond martial arts tournaments that we could record like this. I would ask Hildetaura about it later.

Putting aside possible plans for the future, Reliared and I ran around the

campus, visiting the various dojos and continuing the participant interviews in the early morning and during lunch. After school, Hildetaura took over. We would have helped in that time slot if we hadn't had our own recordings to think about, but it was just impossible for our schedules.

We split up to visit as many clubs as possible and ended up discovering that there were quite a lot of dojos explicitly dedicated to becoming stronger in battle, ranging from close combat to swordsmanship to even spearmanship.

There were three dojos for swordsmanship alone, and there was one more weaponless style beyond the Heavenstriker. Naturally, you don't need to hear my comment about how strong they were. Apparently, all the weapon arts would enter the swordsmanship category. In the past, the dojos all used to be swordsmanship, so it was a leftover from that.

As a result of all of the above, that week was incredibly hectic.

"The response has been incredible. We have had many inquiries coming in from the parents of the participants."

A week later, as Hildetaura was so cheerfully reporting, our first plan for Project Magivision was already a success. We had decided the interview period would end once the registrations did, so our work was finished for now.

Contestants would start making their final adjustments, and some would be putting in one last push for their training. It would be bad if we got in their way. There was nothing left for us to do. If any issues cropped up though, naturally we would assist.

We all gathered in Reliared's dorm room for an early celebration. Hildetaura was enjoying her elegant teatime while eating away at some apple pie she had brought from the castle. Technically, the reason we were here was to have a review meeting.

"It seems to have been received well in our territories. We've sold a few more MagiPads," Reliared reported. I had received a letter from the Liston territories that confirmed we were also seeing the same phenomenon.

And that meant...

“The plan to use children to promote magivision worked.”

“Nia, phrasing!”

“Yes. The more a parent loves their child, the more money they are willing to pay to watch their child enjoy life.”

“Miss Hilde, phrasing!”

The more time we spent together, the more Reliared was getting used to being in Hildetaura’s presence—and that meant she was slowly letting go of her restraint.

We weren’t quite complaining per se, but we did discuss everything that had occurred while conducting the interviews. There was no end to the stories we could tell of accidents and mistakes made by the improvised production crew, but there were stories of their growth as well.

Generally, we split ourselves up across the campus, so we didn’t know the specifics of what the others had experienced. The footage would all go through checks, but a lot of it would get edited out in postproduction, so the only ones who would know all the behind-the-scenes stories were those who had been there.

All that we had recorded here would go to the capital’s broadcasting station, where parts would be added and removed as necessary, allowing it to be broadcast in an easily consumable state. In other words, there were a lot of fun little stories that regular viewers wouldn’t get to hear about.

It may have looked like we were having a fun little chat, but we really were having a review meeting to make plans for the future. The one with the most magivision experience of the three of us was Hildetaura, but even she was still a young child. Children’s ability to react to unpredictable situations on the fly wasn’t very high due to their lack of life experience—especially when it came to accidents and the like. If possible, I would like them to learn the correct way to handle those moments. Though I had a past life, I didn’t have my memories, so this wasn’t exactly something I excelled at either. It would be so much easier if I could just beat them up and call it a day.

“I would always end up getting asked about magivision, even though I was

supposed to be the one asking the questions. 'I want to be on magivision too. How do I do it?'" Reliared's limited interview time kept getting used up by the outgoing female students who wanted to stand out. It apparently greatly messed up her schedule. This would also be deemed a kind of incident. Something like that would usually get cut out in editing, so the viewer would never see it.

"How did you respond, Relia?" Hildetaura asked.

"The only thing I could tell her was that I didn't know. But then when I thought about it more, I realized I don't think anyone could actually make it onto magivision right now without the correct connections..."

The Liston territories were probably similar. Magivision was still a young industry so there was much that was still developing. Bendelio had a program on the Liston Channel because he had already been working for the broadcasting station at the time. Reliared and I both made it onto magivision because of our families. Hildetaura, though not quite the same, was no doubt on magivision due to similar circumstances. Magivision was originally a political strategy, after all. It all started with her family.

"I see... Then we could eventually recruit students who want to appear on magivision," came the princess's suggestion.

"I agree," I said. There were those skilled at fighting just as there were those who were skilled at mathematics. No doubt there were those skilled in the performing arts too. We were putting on a martial arts tournament this time, but there was always the possibility we could carry out a recording for a different type of event next. If we kept piling up actual events like this, and the school's production crew continued to improve, we'd be able to create plenty more opportunities for recordings within the school.

"We've already been seeing the results of this attempt to promote magivision. Though sales are still pretty low, we've been selling more MagiPads, and the more experience the crew gets, the more flexible and efficient they'll become. Though the scale will be different, I think it'll be good to keep doing recordings on campus. We can continue to use the children until they get bored of it."

“Like I said, Nia, your phrasing!”

“That...does sound like an option. But trying to force a recording when nothing is going on seems difficult. I do want to take advantage of the parents’ love as much as we can, but there are already many who are opposed to us leaking what goes on inside the school.”

“Miss Hilde, *please!*”

“In any case, let us talk more after the martial arts tournament. We must focus on what is in front of us for now.”

Roger that.

“Shall we cover the main topic then?” Reliared asked after we had finished discussing the interviews.

I could only look at her in confusion. I didn’t know what she was talking about, but both Reliared and Hildetaura were looking expectantly at me. In fact, even Lynokis and Esuella were looking at me.

“What?”

Everyone stared at me with expectant gazes, as if they were close to solving a mystery, but I had absolutely no idea what this topic was. What happened? What happened that made them so interested in me?

Ohhh, wait.

“I see now. It’s about Neal, isn’t it?”

I was the one who had interviewed my brother. It hadn’t been the smoothest interview, but I had at least roughly explained that we were siblings in the recording.

Neal was a student of the Satomi Swift Swordsmanship dojo. As the name implied, it was a style that put an emphasis on speed. Apparently, he was one of the stronger members. Every time he returned home for vacation, I could tell that he had improved, which meant there was a master who was properly teaching the way of the sword.

Though my brother was only a third-year, halfway through elementary school, he was already top of his elementary school class. He didn’t easily lose to

middle school students who were decently skilled either.

When we'd bumped into each other on campus at one point, Neal had said, "If you aren't entering the tournament, I might." I'd told him that I wasn't, and that had settled the matter of his participation. Honestly, I thought he had been joking. Neal was always so resistant to appearing on magivision.

"I am a little curious about that, admittedly. But no," Reliared said.

What? That wasn't it?

"But I did have a lot of random older students say to me, 'Who's that cute boy? Introduce him to me right now!'" That was about the only extreme change I could think of that had happened around me. "That reminds me, Hilde, how is Neal doing? Is he keeping up with his studies?"

My brother and Hildetaura were in the same year. They seemed to get along, but I hadn't heard how close they actually were.

"Neal is a stellar student. He scores well in both academics and sports and is kind to absolutely everyone. There is nothing to criticize him for."

He was kind to everyone, was he?

"What I'm hearing from that is that there are often catfights surrounding my brother."

"That can't be true!" Reliared immediately protested.

"Well, there does appear to be a lot more happening than it seems on the surface. Just the other day, two girls got into a physical altercation over Neal."

"The catfights are real?! What do you mean that's not on the surface?!"

"Because it is not. They do not usually care whom they start their fights in front of, but the one person they absolutely will never involve directly is Neal himself."

"That's a relief, at least," I said, and I meant it. I didn't want my brother to have to witness such bloodshed. He was much more sensitive than I was. I didn't want him to see something that would scar him for life.

"Nothing about that is relieving!"

Clearly, this did not sit so well with Reliared, but there wasn't much we could do about it. It was a natural occurrence with how beautiful he was. You could tell with just one look that he was the kind of boy that would end up making girls cry. And boys too. In both ways.

"It would be different if my brother had a fiancée, I'm sure. Oh, I know. Relia, how about you? Would you like to take my brother's hand in marriage?"

"HUH?! N-NO WAY, WHY WOULD I EVER WANT TO DO THAT?!"

"Hilde is also an option. Ah, hang on, do you already have a fiancé?"

"There do appear to be candidates for my hand, but nothing final. The state of magivision in the coming months will likely affect those offers... But Neal does show great promise. I would have no complaints."

"Hang on, stop, stop, stop! I'll take Young Master Neal! Miss Hilde, you can take, uh, you know, some prince from another country!"

"Really? Then how about we go with Relia to be his fiancée, after all?"

So Hildetaura was willing to exit the fight. Personally, getting married to royalty would be a great boon for the Listons, but then again, we were no longer in a period where one's status was all that important. People were free to love whom they wished. In which case, Neal could do as he pleased.

"I'll make sure to let Neal know that you said you love him so much you'd get married to him the—"

"N-NO, STOP THAT! I'll do it myself one day, okay?!" Reliared's face was bright red as she violently shook her head.

Hmm... Rather than one day, why not just say it now? It wasn't so rare for a situation to change while you were busy worrying to yourself, and then before you knew it, it was too late—especially when it came to matters of love.

"A-A-Anyway! This isn't what we're supposed to be discussing!"

It wasn't? Oh right, yes, this wasn't originally meant to be about Neal. But then what?

"You know! That star of the Satomi Swift Swordsmanship school, Sanowil Badr!"

Was she bothered by us getting nowhere in our conversation, or did she just want to quickly change the subject? Whatever the case, Reliared finally clearly stated who it was they were thinking about.

Sanowil... Oh, right.

"I didn't know there were rumors until recently. I didn't hear them directly, after all."

"Huh?"

They looked surprised. But there were things that it was hard to ask the person directly. This would come under that.

"It was that interview, right? And the thing you're all curious about is what came after, right?"

Pretty much no one had asked me about it directly. By some twist of fate, as it turned out, I had had that standoff with Sanowil before. I refused to hit a child no matter the circumstances, so I had settled for just breaking his sword. It was after that encounter that I had ended up interviewing him.

"This is Sanowil Badr, winner of last year's middle school swordsmanship division of the Interstyle Assembly."

"..."

"Um, could you look at the camera? Not me."

"Hm? Uh, yeah."

"Then once again, could you tell us your name and your school?"

"Sanowil Badr, student of the Satomi Swift Swordsmanship style. Hey, so, about before—"

"We'll talk about that later. For now, let's focus on the interview, okay?"

"Okay..."

"Where are you from?"

"A small floating island just south of the Liston territories. It's pretty close to your home."

“Oh, I see. How are you feeling in the lead-up to the tournament? Do you think you will be a champion again?”

“Champion? How could I assume that knowing there are those younger who are stronger than me...?”

“Um... Gazell from the Alphon school who fought against you in the finals of last year’s tournament has declared by name that he won’t lose to you this time! How do you feel about that?”

“Gazell? More than Gazell, I’d much rather fight you... Please! Have another match with me!”

There’s no way I’m bringing this one back. That was what I had thought to myself at that time. After that exchange, even though the contents were so messed up even postproduction couldn’t do anything about it, it had ended up being broadcast as it was. Personally, I thought the quality was bad enough they should’ve just shelved it, but Sanowil was one of the potential champions, so they couldn’t just leave him out.

When I watched it, the most it did for me was reaffirm that it was in fact a mess, but from the reactions of Reliared, Hildetaura, and even our personal attendants, it appeared it had turned into something else entirely while I wasn’t paying attention.

“Apparently, things got really chaotic after that,” Reliared said. “Gazell ended up having a go at Sanowil for completely ignoring him; it nearly escalated to a full-on fight. Sanowil usually doesn’t care for anything other than swordsmanship, so seeing him so interested in you caught everyone’s attention. And that led to the rumors that you two are going out.”

Oh, really now? Not a single one of those rumors had made it to me directly. There really *had* been a lot going on.

“Did you know?” I asked Lynokis. She simply nodded. *What the hell? At least tell me. Now I’m the only one who’s clueless.* “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I simply detested the thought of you and that questionable boy being together. I swore to never utter his name from my mouth so I could keep him completely out of my acknowledgment.”

Okay then...

“So, Nia, what do you think about Sanowil?” Reliared didn’t hesitate to ask. “He looks cool, and he’s strong, and he’s got a bright future ahead of him, don’t you think? He’s actually pretty popular.”

What did I think about him?

“I’d rather he get stronger first.”

Stronger than me, preferably.

“That’s not what I mean. I’m asking if you like him.”

Oh, that meaning.

“I see my brother plenty so being handsome has little effect on me.”

“What, really? You know, thinking about it, even your father’s cool. Mine’s just an old man by now.”

“Ornitt Liston, yes? I have not met him personally, but he certainly is quite attractive from what I have seen on magivision,” Hildetaura said. My mother was pretty too, and my brother took after her.

“While we’re on the topic, what do your marriage candidates look like, Miss Hilde? They must be pretty.”

“Well... Agewise, they are closer to being my uncles.”

“Ew, I didn’t realize it was one of those typical political marriages...”

“But of course it is. I *am* royalty. Even in this day and age, this has not changed. But there are those who look as cool as Lord Ornitt does, so there is hope, however small! At least, I’m hanging on to that...” Hildetaura quietly muttered, before she suddenly fiercely wrapped her arms around herself. “Ahhh! I want to experience a burning, passionate love one day! And have a wonderful gentleman take me far, far away from here!”

“This pie’s delicious.”

“I agree. There’s a bit of honey in it, isn’t there? It’s nice.”

“At least say something...” Hildetaura weakly protested, frozen in place with her arms still wrapped around herself as Reliared and I munched away at the

pie.

“It’s just I don’t think I should’ve seen that...”

I agreed.

“It was so painful to look at that I was afraid I’d burn myself if I got too close.”

“Nia! That’s too far!” Reliared scolded.

Then what else was I meant to say? She might as well have just told me to stop talking.

“If I had the power, I would force both of you to have to marry someone you did not want to...”

Stop right there. This might actually happen if it’s you saying it.

After that, our meeting to reflect on Project Magivision completely morphed into a meeting about romance.

Preparations for the tournament were continuing smoothly. The Interstyle Assembly that took place in fall each year was open to the public, and unlike our tournament, it included high school students as well. On that day alone, parents were allowed to come and see their children’s achievements and could even get to see some of the school facilities, turning it into a large-scale event for the royal capital.

On the other hand, this undeniably spontaneous martial arts tournament of ours would be broadcast on magivision, but entry into the campus would not be permitted. In other words, it was a much smaller scale event that could only be seen in person by the students. Thanks to the fact that no members of the public were allowed in, there was no need to make preparations to regulate or guide them, making it much easier to set up the space we would need.

Interviews were carried out with last-minute participants, and since we were recording all of the preparations, there were a lot of students who volunteered to help out for the chance to appear on magivision. In other words, we were able to be so efficient because we had a lot of free man power.

Apparently, it had been decided at the start that if reactions to the interviews

were lackluster, we wouldn't broadcast anything else leading up to the tournament. Everything we were using for the recordings—the equipment, the manastones that recorded the images and audio—wasn't cheap by any means. Producing something with no demand was just a waste of money and resources, so it made sense. If a production wasn't profitable, it was immediately scrapped.

If it did end up being scrapped, the plan was to keep replaying the interview recordings, but thankfully, the reception had been good, so the decision was made quite early on to record additional interviews and also behind-the-scenes footage.

That led to us three girls spending another week recording for the tournament. We introduced what preparations were being done for the day and also recorded the contestants training. There wasn't really that much work to do, but it kept us busy until the tournament anyway.

It was in the middle of all of that that *it* happened.

There were only a few days left until the tournament. I had gone to visit the Heavenstriker dojo immediately after school. I had made sure to run here faster than anyone else, so it was still devoid of students when I arrived. We had plans to record the students' training, but I had come ahead of the production crew.

This was where I would be recording today. The production crew would be right behind me.

But still.

I wanted even the tiniest bit of free time to move around alone.

"Nia. I give much thanks for you sparing your time to come here."

No matter how short the time, all I needed was to meet this man: Gandolph, standin instructor for the school's Heavenstriker dojo, built like an absolute rock. He was kneeling alone waiting for his students when I arrived, but the moment he saw me, he ran over and bowed his head as low as it could possibly go, so much so that he was below me, a six-year-old girl.

"Please stop with that, I beg of you."

Honestly, it almost felt like he was mocking me when he went that far. I didn't need such an exaggerated greeting.

"But age means little when it comes to the martial way. Strength is everything," he said, raising his head and looking down at me with complete seriousness in his eyes. *Wow, our height difference really is something else.* "If you allowed me, I would much rather call you Master Nia."

What was this man saying? *Ugh, so bright! Stop looking at me with those eyes as pure as a young lad's!*

"Well, you can if you want."

"Really?! Master Nia!"

"But you practice the Heavenstriker style, don't you? I don't. Should you really be calling me your master? Wouldn't that mean you've abandoned the Heavenstriker?"

"It is...certainly something that causes me hesitation."

There should have been no need for that. You shouldn't so easily abandon something you've spent years upon years committing yourself to.

"Follow the strong. Beg for instruction. I don't disagree with such an old way of thinking, but that isn't the era we're in anymore." *However much those old ways may be suited to me.* When you recognized one was stronger than you, it didn't matter how old or young they were—it was normal to bow your head and beg to be taught. I rather liked such a stance towards martial arts, honestly.

But nowadays, that wasn't how things were done.

"And anyway, you're meant to be taking the role of my father. Just speak normally."

"Right... Then I shall do exactly that, Mast— Nia."

Well, it was a start at least. He'd be fine once he was used to it.

"Anyway, how did it go?"

I had arrived ahead of everyone else so I could actually ask about the Umbral Arena. Naturally, I had not given up on attending. I had completely stopped

talking about the arena to Lynokis ever since our argument, so I was certain she believed I had completely given up. Unfortunately for her, I hadn't given up at all! Behind the scenes of the martial arts tournament, I had steadily been making preparations.

"About that, Mast— Nia, I have learned many a new thing."

It was hard for me to ignore the strange way he was now speaking in his attempt to force the politeness out, but I would refrain from commenting for now.

After bringing up the Umbral Arena to Gandolph the first time, I had challenged him to a match with an obvious outcome and achieved victory as expected, and now we were here. Upon losing to me, Gandolph had accepted his defeat and told me he would look into the special tournament for me. Honestly, I still didn't even know the exact date of the tournament, so I couldn't have asked for a better outcome. This man was a truly competent collaborator, and I was grateful for that.

I had come here to see what he had found with this little free time I had.

"Nia, have you ever heard of the Sword Demon?"

The who now?

"No. I guess from the name they must be some master swordsman?"

"Indeed. Um... Yeah, he's a swordsman who also works as an adventurer. That is his nickname or, I suppose, his alias."

Wow, that sounded great!

"Hearing that someone with such an impressive alias exists is exciting. I wonder just how strong he is."

I was fairly sure he would fail to live up to his name, but still, that slight hope that there was someone out there stronger than me got my blood boiling and my heart pounding. How could I *not* get excited?

"He's a famous adventurer, so at the very least, there is no doubt as to his strength."

That's even better!

“You have likely surmised by now, but he’ll be at the Umbral Arena.”

I *knew* that had to be why he was bringing him up! *That’s brilliant to hear!*
That meant that this Sword Demon person had to be the special guest!

“And it appears the date has been decided. By some strange coincidence, it’ll be happening on the night of our own martial arts tournament.”

Oh, that was sooner than expected. I had thought it would at least be a few days after. Though thinking back, it was about two weeks ago when I’d heard about the event at the Shifty Shadow Rat, so this actually made more sense.

“I’m looking forward to it!”

I wasn’t expecting much from a martial arts tournament filled with nothing but children, but the fact I would be able to go see a master practitioner known as the Sword Demon on that very same night... Though my reason was entirely different, I was actually starting to look forward to that day as much as the rest of the school!

“The thought of you going to such a place by yourself fills me with great dread, but I don’t feel right taking a child with me to it either... Regardless, a promise is a promise. I will take you to the arena.”

Good!

“I’m counting on you, Gandolph.”

“Yes, ma’am. By the way...if you have time, I would much appreciate it if you could train me.”

Sure, why not.

“I’m in an exceedingly good mood right now. Take up your stance. I’ll observe your technique.”

“Right away! Thank you very much!”

“Also, seriously, pay attention to how you talk. You’re going to come across as some weirdo.”

“Of course! I will be careful!”

The production crew arrived shortly after that, so I barely had any time to

observe his training, yet regardless, that man really did look happy.

The days following our agreement both felt too long and yet also went by in the blink of an eye. As the day of the tournament neared, preparations only became busier, and eventually, I ended up being asked to do menial tasks on top of my recording. Everything was so hectic that the day of the tournament arrived before I knew it.

High school students weren't allowed to participate in this tournament, but thanks to all the magivision work we had been doing, we still had a good number of participants. I was a little worried about the schedule at first, but we somehow managed to finish the preliminaries in the morning, leaving time for the main matches in the afternoon. But then the main matches ended up running overtime, and so we didn't finish until the evening.

Our improvised student production crew cooperated with the pros from the capital's broadcasting station to record the competition, and it would be aired tomorrow after going away for editing. That meant that the spectating students already knew the winners, the outcome of all the matches, even the accidental drama that occurred, but those who were excitedly waiting with their MagiPads wouldn't be able to know until tomorrow.

This one has promise. I sense a real gift in that one. They have a talent for this. Their instincts are sharp. That weapon doesn't suit them. The way they've trained isn't enough for them. All those thoughts flashed through my mind as I watched that children's martial arts tournament. I felt as if I was a parent myself.

It was fun in its own way, despite the frustration that accompanied. Sanowil and Gazell, the two infamous middle school rivals, were both skilled and talented martial artists. More than anything, they already had that battle sense that wouldn't necessarily awaken in even the most experienced martial artists. That was massive, especially given how such matters of instinct were often tied to one's natural talent.

Given my current position, offering to take them on as my students was the last thing I would be able to do. If only their masters were better, they might

see incredible growth.

Well, such wording may have been misleading. Their masters were not bad at all. Compared to an average person, they were undoubtedly strong. Yes, they were not bad, but there were levels of strength. They had not crossed even the shortest of the many barriers that existed beyond a regular human's ability. If their teachers had crossed at least three—no, even just *one* of those barriers, those boys would definitely have been trained differently...

With those thoughts running through my mind as I watched on with slight disappointment, the tournament came to an end. The champion of the weapons division was Sanowil. Neal came sixth, so unfortunately he just missed out on getting the awards given to those placing fifth and up.

It was important to note that the middle school division had kids of various sizes participating. For being against those of a much bigger stature than himself, he had done well. In fact, the one who had beaten my brother ended up in tears because of all the complaints and insults from the girls watching. It was far more pitiful to watch than the match itself.

The winner of the weaponless division was Reliared's sister, Ririmi Silver. To be honest, I had underestimated her. She hadn't seemed all that strong at first, but her movements showed an unconcealed talent and proficiency. The longer the match went, the sharper her movements became.

Clearly, Ririmi was the type of fighter to get stronger the more focused she became. It wasn't so visible normally, but when she really got into a match, she became far stronger. All martial artists have that tendency in them, but her growth was beyond that. Personally, I thought she was an interesting one—not someone you could find just anywhere.

And so, the tournament came to a close with no big incidents—and that meant the time for me to visit the Umbral Arena finally approached.

"How was the tournament?"

After finishing dinner in the cafeteria and returning to my room, I found Lynokis there waiting for me in her pajamas, having prepared the tea. She had taken a bath to refresh after training while I ate.

“Thankfully, it finished without incident. There were no mishaps, so this should help build support for our next recording.”

The reception to today’s martial arts tournament would no doubt decide if we would do any further recordings within the school, but really, reception even before the tournament was already glowing, so we’d basically succeeded before the day even arrived. That said, it was because everything had been going so well in the preparatory phase that I ended up so nervous all day that some huge mishap would completely ruin all of our efforts. With it having gone so well, I truly was relieved.

Honestly, it would probably have been much less mentally taxing if I had approached it with the mindset of “We don’t know if we’ll succeed or not, so the most we can do for now is give it our all!” What was done was done, though.

The tournament being broadcast would definitely increase the public’s level of familiarity with magivision to some degree. We just needed to take advantage of the love a parent had for their child to promote it even further.

“I wish you could’ve seen it too, Lynokis.”

“There was nothing we could’ve done. Strictly speaking, personal attendants are civilians, after all.”

Since the tournament hadn’t been open to the public, even personal attendants were unable to attend. At least Lynokis could look forward to the magivision broadcast tomorrow.

“Neal really did his best.”

“Ah, wait, don’t tell me the details. I would like to see Young Master Neal’s efforts with my own eyes first.”

Well, it was natural to not want to be spoiled.

“Then it’s good you didn’t come down to the cafeteria—that was all the girls were talking about down there.”

The young girl aristocrats had been excitedly discussing the results of the tournament, including who was cool, who was cute, and who they absolutely

would never forgive. I was glad they had enjoyed themselves. *My* enjoyment was only just about to get started though.

Calm—I was as calm as I could muster, showing not the slightest sign of anticipation.

With the most calmness I had ever shown, I interacted with Lynokis as I always did all the way up until bedtime, then snuggled under the covers.

“Good night, Young Mistress.”

“Good night, Lynokis.”

Lynokis turned off the light, and then left the room.

Quietly, oh so quietly, I allowed time to pass. I heightened my awareness so I could sense the presence from the neighboring servant’s quarters, waiting for the moment Lynokis fell asleep.

When she had finally fallen into slumber, I wasted no time in quietly getting out of bed and sneaking out the window.

I would later learn that just after I left...

“She...really went.” Lynokis, whom I had thought to be fast asleep, had in fact come to check up on me. “Just what am I going to do with that girl?”

I would also later learn that after letting out a heavy sigh, Lynokis proceeded to jump out the window after me, having prepared for this exact situation.

I would learn that Lynokis had gained the cooperation of Lynette and Esuella, as I had Gandolph.

I would realize that Lynokis had far more freedom to move around than I did while I was in class.

I would learn that the way I had so suddenly stopped bringing up the underground arena had tipped Lynokis off to the fact that I intended to get someone else’s assistance to take me there.

I would learn that Lynokis had been planning countermeasures, since at least

knowing my destination meant that she would be able to find some way to handle it.

I would learn that Lynokis knew for a fact that she would lose if she challenged me to a fight in an attempt to force me to stay home, so she had decided to let me do as I pleased and would strike specifically at that moment.

And finally, I would learn just where Lynokis felt that she had to stand in order to protect me should it come down to it at as shady a place as the Umbral Arena.

Gandolph Logan

A martial artist who has lived life considering only how to become stronger. Those feelings only deepened upon his meeting with Nia.

Age:

23 years old

Title/Occupation:

Stand-in instructor of the Heavenstriker style at the Altoire Academy dojo

Favored fighting style:

Weaponless

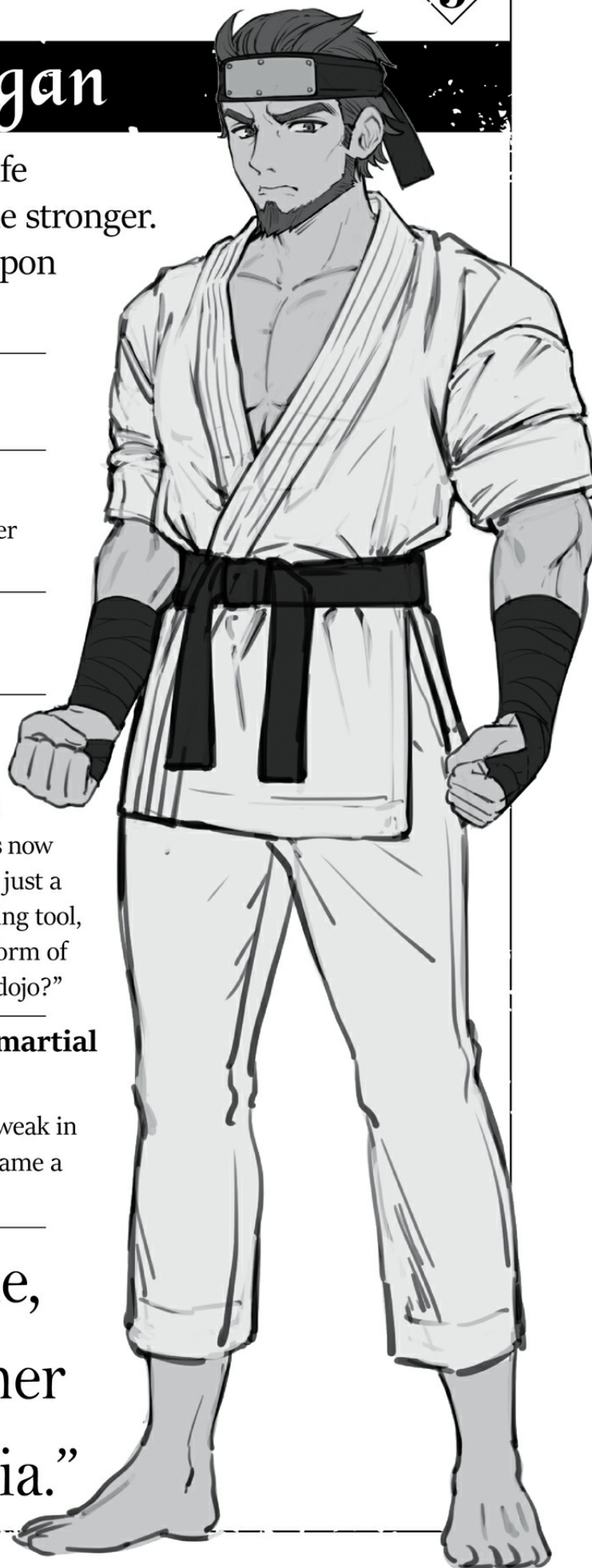
What kind of style is the Heavenstriker style?

“It is a very old martial art that started in the land of warriors, Wu Haitong. It is now known around the world as more than just a martial art but also as an effective dieting tool, as a method to boost health, and as a form of mild exercise. Why not come visit our dojo?”

Why did you decide to become a martial artist?

“My old self was strong in stature but weak in spirit. I wanted to change, and so I became a student of the Heavenstriker.”

“If you allowed me,
I would much rather
call you Master Nia.”



Chapter 6: Infiltrating the Umbral Arena

Late at night, after escaping from the dorms, I rushed to a specific part of the wall that separated the royal capital from the academy. Only a few more steps and I would be in the city; I would be leaving campus grounds.

But those few steps were blockaded by a towering wall.

At the top of that wall was a row of pointed spearheads, though whether they were simply for decoration or were intended for actual practical use, I couldn't say. Was it designed that way to prevent intruders? It was a wall built to protect the academy's students but also to stop those same students from getting out, so it wasn't of a height that even adults could easily cross.

That's not to say that it's too tall for me. As far as I'm concerned, it can hardly be called an obstacle.

I heightened my awareness to search for signs of any people on the other side of the wall, and... Yup, there was Gandolph. Perfect.

Digging out a bag I had previously hidden within one of the nearby planters, I pulled out a dogi for the Heavenstriker school and got myself changed. It was a well-tailored, beautiful white garment, their dojo's formal competition attire.

Personally, I would've been content with a regular training dogi, but I had to strike a good balance in terms of formality for such an occasion. Of course, Gandolph was the one who had prepared it for me. Not only would I be conspicuous in my nightwear, it would be difficult to move around in as well. On top of that, if, by any chance, blood ended up staining it, Lynokis would instantly know where I had been. I wasn't going with the intention to actually get involved in any fights. Honest. But y'know, you couldn't always predict what would happen in these kinds of places. Just in case—*just in case* I ended up in a fight, I had made these preparations. A martial warrior could be challenged to a fight at any time of the day just by being out and about.

I stuffed my pajamas into the same bag and hid it back in the planter.

There we go. I'm glad it hasn't started raining yet.

I did a little run-up, kicked my foot against the wall, and began my ascent. I glided over the wall, neatly avoiding the spearhead at the top.

"Nia!" Gandolph exclaimed the moment he spotted me.

"Let's hurry." I quickly met up with the man waiting on the other side and we immediately ran off into the night, barely exchanging a word.

"Use that room there."

Anzel opened the back entrance and let me into the Shifty Shadow Rat. I'd become well-known around these parts as of late, so we thought it best that I not be seen with Gandolph. If a staff member of a *school*—a facility intended to keep people's precious children safe—were to be seen taking a child to somewhere like this late at night, there would be no fixing his reputation. Worst-case scenario, Gandolph would be dismissed from his staff position and kicked out of the Heavenstriker school. Or the entire dojo could end up removed from the school grounds. Or all of the above. He could even be arrested.

When I brought that up to him, he'd had some boneheaded response like "If it meant I could become your student, Master Nia, then I could survive being kicked out of the Heavenstriker school..." Despite looking like a spoilsport who couldn't take a joke, he had a surprising sense of humor.

It wasn't a joke? No way. No martial artist would abandon the art that they had so thoroughly trained in for years, just like that... Right?

Regardless, there were often a lot of thugs hanging around the entrance to the bar, and there were just as many inside of it, so we'd decided it would be best for me to enter through the back. Anzel then let me through to his bedroom, fitted with only a bed and a few personal belongings, smelling faintly of alcohol and cigarettes, so I could get myself ready properly.

"I'm gonna go get what you ordered. You can use my room as you need to."

After Anzel left, Gandolph grabbed his jacket, and then looked at me.

“Is it all right for me to get changed?”

“Go ahead.”

Though I was technically a child, Gandolph still treated me like a lady and asked permission first before taking off his clothes and getting changed into something a little more formal. It was supposed to be a fairly expensive outfit, but...

“It’s really tight on you, huh?”

“It appears I have gotten a little larger since I had it tailored. It is rare that I wear formal attire, you see. It was an expensive outfit for me too...”

It definitely looked painfully tight for him to wear... But if you thought of it as wearing clothes that were a little too small in an endearing, wordless self-assertion of one’s muscles, surely this level of tightness was fine.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Anzel returned with the voluptuous Fressa in tow. “Evening, Lily. I’ll help you out here, okay?” she greeted me.

“Your clothes are lookin’ pretty tight on you, ain’t they?” Anzel remarked upon noticing Gandolph’s outfit. “Can you even lift your arms?”

“Ugh... Does it really look that strange?”

“A bit, but honestly, it’s fine,” the bartender reassured him. “There’s guys who deliberately wear clothes that are too small for them, so you’ll pass.”

The new master of the bar and the man in the constricting outfit spoke between themselves, while my white-haired self sat down on a chair by the woman in the formfitting outfit.

Incidentally, Anzel and Gandolph had met when I asked Gandolph to run an errand while I was tied up with my magivision duties. Anzel was surprisingly famous in the underworld for his work as a bodyguard, and Gandolph had made a name for himself as a martial artist, so both of them were at least aware of each other. It seemed that for those in this world, being even slightly renowned served as a good enough introduction, so the two of them had hit it off fairly quick.

“I’m going to start now, okay?”

And now, it was time for the final touches. What Fressa held was a potion I had bought for this specific outing. The small vial held a liquid that could temporarily dye one’s hair. It was what Anzel had gone to get for me. The effects lasted for approximately a day, but there was an antidote that could instantly dispel the dye, so I wouldn’t need to worry about the dye lasting too long or not long enough.

It had originally been developed for royalty or aristocrats to effectively disguise themselves should the situation call for it, and as a result, it was quite expensive. I had no choice in the matter, though. My hair color stood out more than any other, so if I didn’t hide it in some way, there was no way this plan would work. Incidentally, my source of information and my middleman were both a certain bartender.

I had tested it out a little before today, so I knew there were no issues with it. With trained hands, Fressa scattered the magic liquid on my head and ran it through my hair with a comb. I had no mirror in front of me, but I could tell from Gandolph and Anzel’s reactions that the dye was already taking effect.

“And we’re done.”

After having swiftly finished running the dye through my hair, Fressa decided to tie my hair up while she was there. Both my hair color and style were different now; there was no way I would be caught. With my hair pulled up like a horse’s tail, I pulled it round to the front to check the color.

Perfect. It’s a dark brown similar enough to Gandolph’s that they’ll have to believe we’re related now.

“What do you think?” I asked the three adults present, just in case.

“You look adorable!”

“You look so plain without your white hair.”

“It suits you exceedingly well, Master.”

Why were none of them touching on the important part? *Someone say I look like a completely different person.* I wasn’t fishing for compliments—or insults,

for that matter. Well, I supposed being plain meant that anything distinctive about me was now hidden, so it had to be fine.

There was apparently a drug that could change your eye color as well, but I deemed it unimportant to go so far this time. It was also expensive so I preferred to refrain if I could.

“More importantly, pay me back for the dye already.”

Though I was commenting on the prices, I had actually borrowed money from Anzel to buy the hair dye. My allowance was entirely controlled by Lynokis, so I couldn't spend it without her noticing. Hell, I didn't even know how much money I had.

“I'll return it to you when I grow up. How about when I'm old enough to enter the Umbral Arena as a fighter?”

All I had to do was participate in a match and have him bet on me, and we'd make that money back in seconds. If not that, I could explore untouched floating islands or gather materials from dungeons. The moment I was legally allowed to get involved in such activities, I could pay him back however much he wished.

“Yeah, and how young are you again? Ugh, fine, but you bet your ass you'll be paying interest.”

It would likely take over a decade for me to pay him back, yes.

“We can do that if you want, but don't you think it would be much better if we worked on a 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' basis?”

“Fine, no money. But you owe me twice, you hear me? That's the debt and the interest. Better get ready to stick your neck out for me when I need you.”

Twice, hm? Well, I could accept that.

“That's fine with me. Now, shall we go?”

Gandolph was in his formal attire, and I was in the Heavenstriker competition attire. According to the cover we had created for ourselves, my father was crazy about martial arts, and I was the child being forced to go along with his insanity.

There weren't many normal people who set foot in the Umbral Arena. If anything, every single person there definitely had their secrets. Whether we were related by blood or not, it wasn't the kind of place where people would pry too deeply into our affairs. In fact, you were more likely to be regarded negatively if you did pry.

That was why we had Gandolph dress the way we did—to make him look like a noble at first glance. Commoners with a shady past wouldn't want to get anywhere near him.

"You have the invitation?" I asked.

"Yes."

We'd made use of Anzel's connections to get one. He really had done a lot for me.

"Mask?"

"Yes. I'm already wearing it."

Gandolph was a relatively well-known figure in the underworld, so he'd brought a full face mask in order to hide his identity. It wasn't uncommon for aristocrats to take similar measures, so he wouldn't stand out for doing it.

"What's my name?"

"Lily."

"What's your name?"

"Dolph."

I wasn't sure if he'd be able to remember Lily on the spur of the moment, or if he'd react fast enough to being called Dolph, but I wanted to be as sure as possible that there would be no accidental shouting of real names. This was also just a precaution. For all I knew, we wouldn't even have to call out our names at all.

After confirming things once more, I nodded in satisfaction. With this, our preparations to go to the Umbral Arena were well and truly complete.

"Now you just need to watch how you speak."

“Y-Yeah. Is this...chill?”

“Please do be careful, *father*.”

“M-Most certainl— Sure.”

As per usual, this man really was not succeeding in adjusting to more casual speech, but it would have to do for now. There likely would be very little opportunity for us to chat once we were inside anyway. We were there to spectate, and should we have any issues, it wouldn't be hard to silence any witnesses with our fists.

With the invitation we had received from Anzel, we should be able to enter the arena without any checks. Get past the entrance, and we would instantly have much more leeway to move.

“Let's go, shall we?”

The two of us stepped out of the dark of the alley and made our way to a certain port owned by an aristocrat.

Our destination was a warehouse in the desolate district by the port. It was an entrance specifically prepared for aristocrats, so they didn't skimp on security, and there were no gangsters or squatters hanging around. Once night fell, it was a quiet place.

“Scuse me, mind if I see your invitation?” After spending a bit of time walking through the quiet district, we found ourselves being greeted by a man with a well-hidden presence. When he confirmed Gandolph's invitation, he began leading us through. “If you'll follow me, good sir.”

The man seemed quite strong. No doubt he doubled up as security. This was going exactly as Anzel had said it would, so I was fairly sure this meant there would be no checks from here. Now we just needed to be directed to the arena.

Getting Gandolph dressed up in formal attire was the right call after all. Even though he was such a huge man who seemed nothing like a regular aristocrat, what with his bulging muscles and his suspicious mask, we made it in without complications. He even had a small kid along with him. The fact most aristocrats entering this place couldn't really be considered normal probably helped.

Things went very smoothly and we arrived at our destination safely. We were let through to an empty warehouse, and then guided down the stairs to the basement. We made our way past numerous bouncers and were then let through a door at the end of the room. And there...

“This...is wonderful.”

I couldn't help but voice my fascination the moment we entered. The arena that lay just beyond the door burst into view. My face melted as I felt the unrestrained violence in the air. Hatred, humiliation, and bloodlust permeated the vast space. As my body bathed in such human emotion, I was hit by a wave of nostalgia.

Dangerous things—humans (both dead and alive) and negative emotions such as hatred and resentment—would often feel unconsciously attracted to unusual locations like this. That Sword Demon may have also felt himself called to be here, and I may have fallen under that category myself.

Whatever the case, it was undeniable by this point that I would see bloodshed here.

The arena was in the shape of a mortar, with the deepest part blanketed in sand to create the fighting ring, and the audience sat circling it, looking down upon the fighters. Light shone down only on the stars of the show, the spectators left in shadow. There were simple partitions on either side of the seats, creating booths for the spectators to observe from. Thankfully, being somewhat cut off from our surroundings, there was no need for Gandolph and me to force the father-daughter act too much.

“Welcome. This way, please.”

A voluptuous waitress, face caked in makeup, and dressed in a very skimpy outfit—a bunny suit, I think it's called?—led us through to an empty booth. It was a small booth with nothing more than a couple of chairs and a low table, situated towards the middle of the audience circle. Had we been of a higher status, we may have been shown to a better seat, but we could see the arena perfectly fine from here, so I had no issue with it.

“Is wine all right for you, sir?” the waitress asked.

Gandolph silently nodded. Given his difficulty in adjusting his manner of speaking, we had settled on having him talk as little as possible.

“And what about yourself, young miss? Juice?”

Wow, so they would serve even a small child dressed like myself. Clearly alcohol was off the table, though. I responded with a simple “Yes, please,” and the bunny girl immediately strode off. Returning with a wine bottle and some juice, she placed them on our table and left to serve other patrons. She certainly seemed busy.

“Have you ever entered a tournament here before?” I asked Gandolph out of curiosity.

“No. I have had the honor of being invited once before, but beyond that, the most I have ever gotten involved in this side of society was in little back-alley brawls for a bit of coin.”

In other words, he was more of a street fighter.

“But surely your average thug wouldn’t put up much of a fight?”

“Nowadays, I would agree, yes. Back then, I was but a young lad with not even a penny to his name.”

As we continued our hushed conversation, more and more of the booths filled with aristocrats. The fact they all had their faces covered, however simply, made it more than apparent that these were aristocrats with real authority. The fabric of their clothes looked expensive to boot. They were entirely different from Gandolph and his suit practically bursting at the seams.

And, well, there were many who had their own male or female companions. Those not covering their faces were no doubt partners or paramours. Some existed in this world who were aroused by the sight of blood, so it wasn’t so strange for them to bring along a partner for some night activities. Though that certainly did reinforce that this was a place that no child should ever come to. Even I was willing to admit that fact. Other than me, there were no children present.

And yet, the juice was deliciously thick. It was apparent they ordered better fruit than Anzel’s place—likely an extra step taken to accommodate their high-

class guests.

We sat waiting for a while, me sipping away at my juice, Gandolph refusing to even pour the wine into his glass—and then the moment arrived.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen!” A man’s loud voice rang out from somewhere I couldn’t see, and the rowdy arena fell quiet. “The time has come for another night of exhilarating bloodshed, hair-raising flesh-tearing, and delectable deathmatches! Relax and enjoy another bout of the fiercest fighting in all of Altoire!”

The roars of enthusiasm only came from the commoner seats farther down the circle. The aristocrats up top were relatively calm, but it only made the uproar more impressive.

“Then without further ado, let’s get this show started! Give it up for our first two competitors!”

The two metal gates on either side of the arena slowly rose, and out came a man from either side.

“How much blood will be on his hands tonight? Give it up for Red Fist Draijan!”

A shirtless man who had clearly been prioritizing his upper body raised a fist in the air. His bulging muscles, which were probably his pride and joy, were covered with tattoos in a way that made it more than apparent he used to be a gangster.

I certainly could say more than a word or two about his muscle balance. Muscles worked together; the upper body was supported by the lower body. For those who intended to become fighters, it was much more advised to train the whole body equally to allow for efficient flow of power.

“No one can perceive his sonic-fast kicks! Let me hear you roar for the prodigy of the Adler Raging Kick, Woobie!”

The slender man who was to be Draijan’s opponent punched his fist into his other palm and bowed. His upper body was also uncovered, but he had trained to trim off any excess fat to maintain a lean figure. The announcer said he had

sonic-fast kicks, right? But with a body like that, kicks were most likely not his only specialty.

These two will now fight, hm?

“Would you like to place a bet?” a bunny girl came over and quietly asked.

“Ow!” Gandolph went to shake his head, but I swiftly gave him a punch to his side.

“Bet on the man with the tattoos,” I whispered when he glared at me accusingly. From my own judgment, the guy with the tattoos was stronger. Of course, on a personal level, I’d much rather support the martial artist, but I could tell by looking at them that he wasn’t the one with the strength to win.

“I’m afraid that betting is a little...”

“Why are you being so reserved? We’re at an *arena*, for goodness’ sake. You may as well have as much fun as you can.”

“Are you quite serious...?”

Don’t be put off by that, you’re a grown man! Actually...perhaps that was the ordinary response? Here I was, a six-year-old girl who had already selfishly asked to be brought to the Umbral Arena, and now I was telling him to bet on a match. Still, don’t be put off!

“I must admit that I do not have the most money in my possession. If he loses, I’ll have no choice but to survive on a single slice of bread each day...”

“I see how it is. You don’t trust me, do you?”

“I’ll bet my whole savings.”

Good. Go, my loyal fellow. This wasn’t a game of chance, so the outcome was plain to see. *You’ll definitely get the money back, so just go for it.*

“Red Fist, please.”

The bunny girl had patiently waited as a professional would as we discussed among ourselves. Having come to his decision, Gandolph handed over a leather pouch that appeared to be rather light.

Thus began tonight’s tournament at the Umbral Arena.

The matches began with a whole slew of boring entrants that I could take down while doing my homework, but the longer the tournament went, the more the interesting contestants started to appear. As a result, my excitement rose and rose, as did Gandolph's winnings.

"Nia, my palms are so sweaty..."

"Sit proud!"

As the matches progressed, the pile of colorful chips sitting on the low table in front of us only continued growing in size. Some simple calculations estimated it to be worth enough for around two or three MagiPads. In my current state, I didn't really care about the money. I was more concerned with the festival of bloodshed and carnage being carried out before my eyes, but that clearly wasn't the case for Gandolph.

"I've never borne witness to such a large pile of money before..."

The betting was going well. We had continued betting all of our chips on each fight and won it all back in return. Though from where I was sitting, it was simply a case of the matchups having very obvious outcomes. It was only expected I would bet correctly.

"Does that mean you're satisfied with stopping bets here?" I asked him.

"Yes... I'm honestly a little afraid to go any further..."

For as large as his body was, he was a dainty little soul, wasn't he? Though given this was concerning money, it would be wrong to act like his hesitance wasn't a virtue. Honestly, I wasn't really thinking about trying to make money here in the first place. They had asked if we wanted to make a bet, so I'd decided we may as well. That was all it was.

After that, I thought it might be nice to get Gandolph some extra money for the trouble I was causing him tonight. If the man himself was done, then there was no need for him to force himself.

"Are you sure? The main event is about to begin," the bunny girl asked in slight confusion when Gandolph told her he didn't want to bet anymore.

“I’m sure. No more bets.”

While she was there, I beckoned the bunny girl over. When she knelt down in front of me, I forced a large number of the chips we had earned into the gap between her breasts, into the gorge that was being forcefully emphasized, into the deep crevice between the two hills that looked about ready to spill out of her clothes. And by that, I mean I really shoved them in, uncaring for the way they changed shape at the pressure.

“That is the payment for the drinks and a tip for you. Please do not hesitate to take it.”

“Th-Thank you...”

I was pretty sure Gandolph would skimp out on it if I left it to him, so I took matters into my own hands. It was highly unlikely this lady had ever had such a form of payment be given by a child, and I could tell it had left her bewildered as she stuttered out a thanks and left.

If you won so many chips, it was practically expected for you to give some of it back to the owners of the establishment, however much you would lose in the process. If you didn’t, they would end up holding it against you—especially if you were a new face. The establishment would probably take about half of what I had given her, but the rest should be counted as a tip and go directly to the worker which still left her with a good amount of money.

That bunny girl would never come to our seats again, no doubt. She seemed to be watching the patrons of the arena closely, so she had to have caught on that I was doing that as a way to pay her off.

“While we’re here, we may as well enjoy the rest of the matches,” I said.

“Yes. I would feel honored to be granted the opportunity to hear your observations and commentary.”

Now that there would be no fluctuation of chips, Gandolph seemed noticeably more relaxed.

After two more rounds, a competitor that caught my eye finally appeared.

“That woman...”

She was dressed quite lightly, wearing only a shirt and some tight-fitting shorts. She was also wearing a mask over her face like Gandolph and the other nobles. I could tell with just one look: that woman was cloaking herself in chi. Out of all the matches I had seen until now, none had crossed that boundary.

There were certainly plenty who had clearly taken steps towards that technique, and it was because of them that I had been able to enjoy myself to this point—after all, if they had made it that far, all it would take was that final little push, and they, too, would achieve the ability of chi manipulation. That exact thing could happen in high-stakes fights such as these. The moment I’d considered that, I couldn’t keep my eyes off the arena. Though ultimately, that miracle didn’t happen.

This girl, however, was different. She had clearly already reached that point. The quality of her control was still that of a young chick’s, but it was very easy to train someone who had already achieved that level. She would only continue to improve from here.

And what about her body shape? Her build was slender, muscles carefully trained. Unlike the bunny girl from earlier, she didn’t have any excessive fat that would give her body a curvier look. On top of that, and perhaps most importantly, she hadn’t overtrained either. You could momentarily compensate for lacking muscular strength with chi perfectly fine. Muscles that kill speed should not be built, especially for female fighters. Compared to men, there were many situations where their natural physique or muscle mass could place them at a comparative disadvantage.

So what did you do? You polished the advantages you *did* have. There was no need to compete head-on with raw strength. You could make use of your speed and deliver a powerful, single-hit special attack that barely relied on your muscles or stature. There was no need to think too hard about it. It was all very simple.

“Hey, that girl’s good,” I said. I liked her. Her body was trained in exactly the way I liked—in fact, it was the ideal body type I wanted my own to be like one day.

“What? Um... Nia?”

“Who’s her opponent? I wonder if they can control it too?”

That girl was a truly attractive martial artist, but the problem would be whom she would be pitted against. Was it someone that could match up to her? Hmm, better not to get my hopes up. There wouldn’t conveniently be someone around who could also use chi like that.

“Next is a girl-vs-girl matchup! Tonight’s her first match, the mysterious warrior, Miss Servant! Still in the prime of her youth, will she have the strength to prove herself worthy of this stage?!”

Her moniker was Miss Servant, hm? I would make sure to remember it.

And her opponent was...

“Facing her today is the Mystic Butterfly of the Night, Scarlet! Her foxy wiles will no doubt whip our attendees into shape and send fresh blood spurting out today as well!”

Definitely nothing special. She was just one of those sexy femmes fatales with a whip. It added some flavor to the match, but her actual skill was nothing worth commenting on. Had they been chosen to go against each other just because they were both women? That was a shame, honestly. Their difference in strength was so noticeably vast it was almost pitiful.

Good grief. Who chose these matchups? Do they have any sense of entertainment? If this was the best the Umbral Arena could offer, they may as well have used Miss Servant in the main event.

“The one with the mask will win,” I declared.

“Nia? Um... Nia. Nia. Is that really... Nia?”

Would this man shut up? Why did he keep saying my name?

“What? The match is about to begin. You make sure you watch properly too.”

It would probably be over in one blow. All it would take was a single strike from Miss Servant at the start of the match. No more than a second would pass. It wasn’t an opponent worth wasting time on, anyway.

The match would last a split second. I was watching intently to not miss that moment, and yet Gandolph was incessant about getting my attention.

“No, um, it’s just...”

I couldn’t help but glare in annoyance at the man for interrupting at such a terrible time, but he was looking awfully troubled. *What? What are you struggling to tell me? Is there something you can’t say?*

“Nia, do forgive me if I am mistaken, but...”

“What? Hurry up and tell me already.”

“How should I put this...?” After I pleaded for the man to hurry up and he continued to hesitate, Gandolph finally seemed to have found the resolve to say what he wanted to say: “Is that not your personal attendant down there?”

What...?

“Huh?”

What did he just say? *What* did he just say?

“LET THE MATCH BEGIIIIIN! Oh my?! Wh-What happened?! Did Miss Servant just...send Scarlet flying with one punch?!”

Unable to witness even a single millisecond of that momentary battle, the audience around us went into an uproar as the most despairing cries of the day could be heard. Only our booth lacked any triumphant fist pumps of joy or cries of utter despair.

Is that not your personal attendant down there?

Those words had my heart in a vice grip. I was lost for words, left in bewilderment. I struggled to turn my head to look back down at the ring. Even though I had been adamant to not miss a single moment of the match, I had done just that. I turned my gaze to the lightly dressed woman who had already been victorious.

It...was Lynokis. Now that I was aware, I realized how stupid I was. No matter what way you looked at it, that was Lynokis. That physique and how she held herself was absolutely hers. How could I have been so blind? I had convinced

myself so thoroughly that there was absolutely no way she would be in a place like this that I hadn't even stopped to consider such a thing. But no, that was absolutely Lynokis.

Of course! Her body is the one I've trained up. That method of circulating chi is exactly as I taught her. Of course it would be close to my ideal, because I've been teaching her specifically so her body would be trained that way!

"B-But why...?"

"Why? I think there would only be one reason," Gandolph said as I sat there in shock.

"Really? Is it because she wanted to find someone stronger than her to fight with?"

"No... I'm sure it was in order to protect you."

What? Even though there was no need to protect me? Even though I was stronger than her?

No, no, I'm the one not catching on here. Of course she would do this. She's been saying this from the start. From start to finish, Lynokis had been most concerned about me and the Liston family. That was why she was so stubborn about trying to stop me from coming to the Umbral Arena and why she was so easily able to resist the intimidation of her master.

Why was Lynokis here? Well, that was obvious. She couldn't use the regular method of entering the arena as an audience member to make sure I was safe, so she had entered as a competitor instead. Without an introduction, it was hard to get into the arena through the front door.

I was able to use Anzel's connections, but Lynokis likely lacked those connections to the underworld, so she had no way to enter the arena directly—and that meant she would be unable to remain by my side. In that case, if she simply entered as a competitor, she would be able to remain close to me, even if our positions were a little different.

Around the time I requested assistance from Gandolph and Anzel, she must have been beating up random thugs down some back alleys in order to get scouted for the match. *That sounds so fun! I'm jealo—* No, no, I'd be due a

lecture if she heard what I really thought.

“I’ve been well and truly one-upped,” I murmured to myself.

I’d never imagined Lynokis would go to such lengths. Hadn’t she been spending all that time telling me not to go to dangerous locations? And yet here she was jumping right into the mouth of that danger all by herself. Even though she was weaker than me, she had dived straight into the position that I wished to be in. The irony was not lost on me, but... No. I was in the wrong this time.

No matter how frustrating it would’ve been, no matter how much of a brick wall she remained, I should’ve only come here after persuading her. Even persuading her with my strength would’ve been a better option than the one I’d chosen.

It was nice getting the opportunity to watch over my student during a match. Given the state of the competitors I had seen until now, there was no way Lynokis would lose. But there was still one more person we had to be wary of: the Sword Demon—the very reason I so desperately wanted to come to the underground arena in the first place as well as the main event of tonight’s tournament. If Lynokis kept winning, she would inevitably end up facing that Sword Demon.

I was... I was well and truly *jealous*.

A few hours prior, around the time that Nia and Gandolph had gotten changed into their disguises at the Shifty Shadow Rat and had begun heading to the Umbral Arena, Lynokis had already arrived and was sitting in the waiting room.

The way she had ended up there in the first place was as Nia had imagined—she had beat up some random thugs in the back allies until she was finally scouted. Specifically, she was doing these outings during the time that Nia was at class.

Lynokis truly had wanted to believe until the very end that her stubborn attempts to chase Nia off of going to the Umbral Arena would succeed, that the young mistress would listen to her and decide to not bother, that she would remain aware of her age and position and act as an aristocratic lady should.

Sure, the girl was often a little crazy, but even she would have lines that she wouldn't cross! Or at the very least, lines that she would *hesitate* to cross. Just hesitating would have been enough.

But then when it came down to it, quitting was the last thing Nia did, and instead, she had crept off into the night—without even a single sign of hesitation. As a result, Lynokis had needed to make use of the plan she made for the worst-case scenario.

The right to participate in the Umbral Arena, light clothes, and a mask to hide her face—she had prepared all of them in advance, but she had prayed that the time wouldn't come where she would have to use them.

“Hey, new face. Where's your manners, huh? Mommy never teach you how to introduce yourself?”

The waiting room was large, and it wasn't split by gender. All participants, whether man or woman, would wait for their matches here. Everyone present was clearly far more trained than the random back-alley gangsters Lynokis had beaten up to get invited. They looked strong, and they were practically radiating murderous energy. They showed no hesitation in picking a fight with Lynokis, the fresh face who had no choice but to participate.

The contestant in front of her now was a large man. Was he trying to get everyone pumped up before their matches, or was he just too worked up? Whatever the case, Lynokis had no intention of wasting her time on him.

“Are you listenin' to— BWUH?!”

That said, he was so noisy that she decided he was deserving of at least a slap. The sharp sound reverberated through the room, and the surrounding participants looked on in shock—not at the fact that she had slapped him but at the unnatural speed of the slap. Everyone there had some degree of combat experience, but the speed of that slap could have collided with any one of them. It was so fast that the man on the receiving end of the blow needed a minute to process just what had happened.

“Stop bothering me. Get lost,” Lynokis coldly spat at the man who looked almost happy that he had been hit in such a way. It was then that she realized, *Ah, I'm actually quite irritated right now.*

Nia had betrayed her. The reminder of that remained in her chest, leading to her horrific mood, and it was only now that she had realized that fact.

“Damn, so there’s someone worth cutting down here, after all.”

Meanwhile, watching Lynokis with rabid eyes was none other than the man who held the title of Sword Demon.

Fressa

Anzel's coworker. She just happened to be out of a job when Anzel asked if she wanted to work for his bar, so she agreed and is now serving as a waitress there.

Age:

20 years old

Title/Occupation:

Underworld bodyguard; assassin

Favored fighting style:

Concealed weapons

Do you have a lover?

"Nope, still looking."

They're big, aren't they?

"You can see that for yourself, can't you?"

How big?

"Big enough to conceal knives and poison vials.
Would you like to check for yourself?"

"Why are you acting like a child throwing a tantrum? What's wrong?"



Chapter 7: The Cursed Blade of the Sword Demon

The crowd went wild on Miss Servant's, or should I say Lynokis's, victory. Well, more accurately, wild with the yells of despair from those who had made the wrong bet.

It...really is Lynokis. I could blink my eyes or pinch my cheeks as much as I wished, but it wouldn't change that it was absolutely Lynokis. However much I wished for my eyes to be deceiving me, it felt impossible to deny now. Especially since she made a point of glancing my way. I was positive she did. As in, she looked *directly* at me. My cover was completely blown. How could this have happened? How did I get caught?

Well... Apologies, excuses, and arguments were all things for me to think about once we returned home.

"And now, it's time for what you've all been waiting for! Feast your eyes upon our gracious guest and our main event!"

Due to the excitement from the crowd reaching its peak, the moment Lynokis and her opponent left the ring, the main event was announced. It was getting late, so it did seem about that time.

I'd accumulated an uncomfortable sweat from the shock of Lynokis's appearance, but there was no point in me worrying or showing restraint now that the cat was out of the bag. I should just enjoy the present. I had gone to such great lengths to get myself here in the first place—what good would it be if I didn't enjoy my time here to the fullest?

Now, release the Sword Demon! Let me bear witness to this arena's strongest foe!

"Dungeon scavenger, bounty hoarder, golem hunter, this sword master does it all! An adventurer so renowned that he's gained the title of the Sword Demon, it's Asuma Hinokiiiiiii!"

My heart was already fluttering as we entered the main event, but hearing

the announcer rattle off the man's achievements, my expectations skyrocketed. A sword master, he said. That sounded perfect. I had seen many a weak martial artist, but not once had I borne witness to a strong swordsman. Was the title of Sword Demon an exaggeration? Just how strong could he really— Ah.

I first saw a foot stepping out, planting itself in the sand of the ring. What followed was a young man dressed in Eastern attire. He was thin and not very tall. If I had to make a guess, he was probably in his mid to late twenties. His messily tied up black hair made it apparent he wasn't from Altoire. Hanging from his waist was a single sword with a curved blade. With only one sharp edge, it had to be an Eastern sword.

"So this is the Sword Demon... He's surprisingly young," Gandolph muttered. But that wasn't the part that was the most noteworthy thing.

"My least favorite kind of fighter may have just appeared."

That sword was no doubt a demon blade—I believe in the East they'd call it a youto. It was a type of blade I had destroyed many times in my previous life. Put simply, demon blades held a demonic energy that would take over the will of its wielder. What is the desire of a sword? What is its reason for existing? The answer to that question was simple: to cut down lives.

Swords put value on their existence through their ability to cut, and so they yearned for it. It was the reason they were forged, so it was a natural train of thought. But a sword cannot move by itself; even with demonic power, it would still be nothing but a tool. Its only option was to take over the mind of its wielder. The sword would ensure its victim no longer had any regard for reason or morality—virtues that would cause hesitation in cutting a life down.

I despised those demon blades that would ruthlessly ignore the will of a human just to cut.

Martial arts were not simple violence, a means to kill. Like hell I'd let anyone reduce it to something so devoid of honor. Reason, self-restraint, conviction, and ambition—only once a person had developed those virtues could they truly say they practiced a martial art. It was the reason I and others could so confidently differentiate it from pure violence.

I could not let an existence which held such an unquenchable desire to cut

down people, to cut down lives, continue to live.

A demon blade's demonic power would increase proportionate to the number of lives it had consumed. At first, the wielder would feel as if the sword itself was helping them become stronger. It would get them pumped up, make them want to use it more and more. As that went on, the wielder's memories would start to become hazy. They'd begin swinging their sword unconsciously and start to do things without even realizing it, until finally, the demon blade took over their consciousness entirely.

To make matters worse, depending on the quality and quantity of the people and souls it had slain, the sword would undeniably begin to develop its own ego. In fact, I was sure there was a demon blade in recorded history that went as far as calling itself the Demon King.

Should the sword nurture them to that point, the wielder would find incredible joy in fighting. They could keep up an endless assault that required an opponent to remain alert at every moment of every day. No human could feasibly do such a thing. Back then, hadn't I continued fighting for endless days and nights without thinking of sleep or food? And of course I'd ultimately dropped dead. No glory. No fanfare.

At least that was probably what had happened. I couldn't remember it clearly, but I had a feeling it was something like that.

It was kind of nostalgic though. I'd spent so much of my life destroying those accursed blades, and yet here one was even in this era. Don't misunderstand though—I still hated the way a demon blade robbed a human of their free will. I simply didn't hate a skilled martial artist who happened to be wielding a demon blade.

Even if it held demonic power, a sword was a sword. What right did I have to criticize the wielder if they were still of their own mind? Swordsmanship was still a martial art to be respected. Demon blades were often very well-made, the craftsman having put their heart and soul into its forging. Having a desire to wield a good blade was not strange; there was just a fine line between the quality of a sword of great renown and that of a demon blade.

But if that wasn't the case, if this was a case that I despised, then I would not

hesitate to destroy that blade. If it was allowed to roam free, it could indiscriminately hurt people at any time.

“The Sword Demon has taken out six competitors! What a raging storm of a man!”

As Anzel had informed me beforehand, they were holding a knockout tournament with the Sword Demon as the main entrant...and six had already been cut down. His opponents had wielded all manner of weapons, from swords, to spears, to maces. Simply his possession of an Eastern blade had chased off any potential unarmed contestants. Regardless, the Sword Demon took all who faced him down without effort.

His skills weren't bad. I could sense the demon blade supporting him a little, but the man himself certainly had his own skill independent of it. That was what made it difficult for me to tell—was he being taken over by the sword or not? Regardless of which it was, his strength was quite middling... From my perspective, he was neither strong nor weak. I could defeat him while balancing a cup of tea on my head.

To make things even more boring, the man wasn't even *taking* the lives of those he cut. He was only shallowly cutting their joints so they would be unable to stand or hold their weapons. How considerate of him.

It was a fighting style clearly controlled by reason, and that, again, was what made it hard for me to determine if he was of his own mind or not. Besides, his opponents were so weak. If they didn't pit him against stronger fighters, then there was no way he could show his full potential. Still, blood was being shed, and the Sword Demon had more than proved his strength to the crowd, so they were still excited.

I want to enter. I want to test for myself just how strong he really is and if he's being controlled by that blade.

In the midst of my bloodthirst being quenched, after yet another competitor who could no longer stand was carried away by a staff member, the Sword Demon raised his voice and brought all attention back to him: “Quiet! Quiet, I say!” After repeating himself several times, the arena finally went silent.

What could he have to say that his string of certain victories hadn't said already? Everything went quiet as the expectant gazes of the crowd fixed on the man.

"I seek a battle with Miss Servant!" he declared.

What? Lynokis was a complete nobody who had literally debuted today, and yet he was challenging her directly? The moment he did, the reaction from the crowd was split between the whispers of the patrons who wanted to support the arena's existing champions and the cheering of the gamblers who wanted to see Miss Servant fight so they could weigh her future odds. There were likely exceptions, but I was sure those were the two main voices I was hearing.

"Will your personal attendant be all right?" Gandolph asked me.

"Honestly, I couldn't tell you." I was well aware of Lynokis's true strength, but I was yet to bear witness to the Sword Demon's. The six matches leading up to this had barely even served as an appetizer. I thought it was at least possible that she could win, but there were still so many uncertainties. "But it only really matters if Lynokis chooses to accept."

Just as I said that, the announcer spoke up once again. "Having been called by name directly, Miss Servant enters the arena!"

Wow, so she really was going to take him up on his challenge.

Ugh, she's so lucky... I want to be called upon like that too.

Miss Servant, dressed in her light attire and mask, once more entered the ring. It looked like she was discussing something with the Sword Demon, but unsurprisingly, I had no idea what they were saying from here.

"Then, let the match..."

Lynokis and the Sword Demon took up their stances.

"...BEGIN!"

A sword slash quietly glinted through the air right as that word was uttered. What immediately followed was Lynokis's right arm flying through the air, blood splashing along the ground with it.

Lynokis's *right arm* flew through the air.

Everyone could only stare in silent shock, unable to register what had happened.

A few seconds of silence passed...and then a storm of voices rampaged through the arena.

Cheers. Screams. Exclamations of anger.

From voices that were left breathless from the shock to the mad voices yelling for more, a mixture of emotions filled the arena in seconds.

"Nia! That... Just now...!"

Gandolph was clearly shaking. It appeared he had seen it clear as day too. *Do you really need to shout my name so loud?* Perhaps it was silly to worry about that when everyone around us was *this* deafening, though.

"Bravo, Sword Demon," I muttered, grabbing the wine bottle on the table in front of me and standing up. Honestly. For being a half-baked martial artist, he really put on one hell of a show, didn't he? And that was exactly why I had to go.

"Hm?"

He wasn't bad, but he still had a long way to improve. I descended to the fighting ring among the ceaseless cheers and cries. The crowd had been so worked up that they were left in a state of hysterical chaos, so most didn't even notice that a child like me had entered. Of course, the Sword Demon noticed right away and looked straight at me.

"A child...? What need has a child to be here?"

"I'll answer your questions, but put that sword away first. The match has been decided, no?"

The excruciating pain of having a limb cut off had Lynokis down on her knees, gripping her right shoulder tight. The Sword Demon was raising his sword right beside her, as if he was about to behead her.

I was sure he would've done exactly that if I hadn't stepped in.

“This is the Umbral Arena. Killing is permitted on these grounds. For what reason should I stop?”

“I understand. But I’d like you to reconsider.”

Their match had been a respectable one. Lynokis had simply lost to the Sword Demon. That was all there was to it. I had no complaints about what had just occurred. In fact, I wanted to praise Lynokis for her efforts. I really did think it was a wonderful battle.

The one who had initiated the assault the moment the battle began was Lynokis. The moment the announcer had signaled the start of the match, Lynokis had taken a decisive step forward and unleashed a right straight punch at the speed of light. I had seen her improvement over our daily training. It was a step forward that even had me marveling at the sight. There were very few people in the world who could respond to a strike like that.

But the Sword Demon had.

He had taken her fist with the flat of his blade, let it slide across, and then countered by standing his blade upright. That was what had led to her being dismembered. Despite neither of them being masters of their arts, it truly was a face-off between two highly skilled fighters. Much of the crowd knew little to nothing about martial arts and would have been unable to see what had happened because of how fast it had been.

And yet, I had no doubt they all unconsciously felt that they had witnessed a rare and incredible matchup, and that was what had led to the uproar. They didn’t know exactly what had happened, but they knew it wasn’t as simple as Lynokis getting her arm cut off. Even Gandolph had been trembling at seeing a precipice of martial arts that he had yet to reach himself. *Excitement* had been the cause of that trembling. That moment had satisfied his bloodlust as a martial artist so fully that his flesh and bones couldn’t help but react.

This fight could only have been called a true match between two martial artists, a match fitting of being called the night’s main event. But that was exactly why.

“She is still weak, but she’ll only get stronger. It would be a shame for her to die here.”

The Sword Demon was silent.

“You too. In fact, is killing her a step you feel you have to take to get stronger? Is it your own desire? Or is this the will of the demon blade?”

Clearly, I had touched a nerve. The Sword Demon pointed the tip of his blade towards me. “Why do you know about the demon blade?”

“Why indeed.”

Now that his target had changed, I was finally able to approach Lynokis. One wrong move and I was pretty sure her head would’ve been next, so I’d chosen to prioritize getting his attention on me first.

Make no mistake though. If he dares try to swing his blade at me, I will not hesitate to retaliate.

I placed a hand on Lynokis’s left shoulder from where she remained motionless and whispered in her ear. “Focus your inner chi on the area your arm was cut. It will stop the bleeding and help minimize the pain.”

No response. She was focusing so intently on withstanding the pain that she couldn’t hear me.

“Let me see then.” I ran my chi through Lynokis’s body, guiding her own chi towards her right arm. The blood spilling out of her wound began to slow.

“Young...Mistress...?” Lynokis finally had the leeway to focus on her surroundings. The blood loss wasn’t anything to scoff at, but given she was still conscious, it could’ve been much worse. I would’ve been in real trouble if that were the case.

“Keep your focus,” I told her. She would likely be fine now. The wound was a clean cut, so as long as it was dealt with quickly, her arm could easily be reattached.

Now then.

Delaying Lynokis’s treatment wouldn’t be good, so I’d best get this over with as fast as I can.

I turned back to the Sword Demon, who was now entirely fixated on me.

“Consider this a treat from me to you for showing me such a wonderful match and for sparing Miss Servant.” I took the wine bottle I had brought down with me and spilled the contents onto the ground. “I’ll show you the greatest heights. There should be no reward more desirable for a martial artist, right?”

The Sword Demon eyed me suspiciously. “With that glass bottle?”

“Oh, this?” I took the now empty wine bottle and lowered myself into a battle stance. “You’re famous, aren’t you? I would feel bad if I didn’t have this at least.”

First, a child had suddenly appeared in front of him, then that very same child had started spouting some nonsense. All of it was probably gibberish to the man. The frown on his face made it apparent that he couldn’t grasp the meaning of my words or understand the situation he was in.

But that wasn’t important. What *was* was that there were currently two martial artists standing here, one still in training, the other far superior. Nothing more.

“Losing to an unarmed child versus losing to a child with a weapon creates a very different image to those watching,” I continued.

Many of the spectators were cheering in both confusion and excitement. I was about to take the famous adventurer known as the Sword Demon and make him live through the most embarrassing moment in his life right here, in this arena. Losing to a child using a weapon would at least help him save *some* face.

“Hmph. You’re talking like you’ve already won.” The Sword Demon smiled as he readied his own stance. This was exactly what I had wanted. His eyes weren’t reflecting his smile one bit—they were completely filled with the intent to kill. “You are not some simple infant; I see that now. Allow me to test your strength.”

I was glad that he wasn’t underestimating me at least. I was so sick of opponents who would hold back because all they saw was a child. Nothing but disappointment awaited me at every turn when that assumption was made.

“Wait, before we start, allow me one last question: who forged that sword?”

“My sword?” he repeated, taken aback for a moment. “Kudo Sasanosuke.”

What a nostalgic name!

“Then that has to be one of his early works, right? Given how beautiful and elegant it is. The older Sasanosuke got, the more vulgar his works became; they were so filled with murderous intent. Though if we were to judge by simple objective quality, then his later works were certainly much better.”

I was now convinced. If that sword was an *early* work made by Kudo Sasanosuke—a sick swordsmith who had pursued the creation of the perfect sword to kill the living—then it wasn’t a demon blade that could take over a human’s consciousness. It would have been made at a time when Sasanosuke was still a young man creating swords only to cut people. The intensity of the emotions and obsessions hammered into those swords was dramatically different to that of the ones he had made later in life.

I can let this sword go then.

“Shall we begin our bout?” I couldn’t delay Lynokis’s treatment, so the sooner we got this over with, the better. We didn’t need a signal to start our fight. Both of us were already readying our stances among the raucous cries from around us. All that mattered was the timing of our opponent. We refused to take even a single glance away from the other—and then, the Sword Demon twitched.

“Ngh?!”

Good thrust.

It was overflowing with the intent to kill, aimed right for my throat. *Not bad at all.* But the tip of his blade thrust through the air right beside his original aim, missing his mark. I had moved not a single step. I’d simply moved my hand the tiniest bit, taken the strike with the glass bottle, and adjusted the angle of the blade. That was all it took to dodge it.

The Sword Demon showed surprise on his face for just a moment. I was glad. Really, it was a strike I could’ve taken with my hand, but for someone like myself, I could deflect it with an object as well. It would have been difficult if my opponent was stronger, though. Being unarmed really was much better for me.

“RAH!”

And yet, he was barely stunned by his miss. Though surprised, the Sword Demon immediately struck down twice, three times, all with the intention of killing me. He truly was releasing a deliciously murderous intent. He was another of those who would be much stronger had his teacher been better.

I'd had enough playing around though.

"Are you done?"

In only a few seconds, the Sword Demon had slashed his sword fifty times. I had remained there, taking not a single step as I diverted all of his attacks—and the wine bottle hadn't taken a single scratch. The difference in our strength was clear.

"Wh-What kind of beast are you?!"

That display had shaken even him up. He must have used his all at this moment. In which case, it would be fine for me to end it here.

The Sword Demon was defeated. All it took was a good knock over the head with the wine bottle and he was out for the count. This time, the crowd went completely silent, even though I had done something far more advanced than what had occurred between Lynokis and the Sword Demon! Oh, was that why? That was why everyone was put off. They were scared of me, judging me because I was too strong. What weaklings.

"Hurry up!"

Oh wow, the first aid team was very quick to respond. I supposed they *were* stationed in a place where violence was the norm. They dashed in the second I took down the Sword Demon, specifically to retrieve Lynokis. They didn't appear to have seen my standoff with the Sword Demon, so they ignored me and went straight to loading Lynokis onto a stretcher before carting her off.

Never mind, they're making sure to take the Sword Demon as well. Look after them for me.

Even though killing was permitted on these grounds, that didn't mean the organizers *wanted* people to die. I picked up Lynokis's amputated arm and chased after them. The crowd was still silent around us.

And then finally, I heard angered voices erupt from behind me, though it wasn't something worth stopping for.

We rushed through the large waiting room to the infirmary. The smell of disinfectant and blood mixing together in the air was quickly getting to my head.

"We need to stop the bleeding and get the patient anesthetized! Sterilize the wound, now!" A female underground doctor was shouting out orders to her two female assistants as she began getting to work. I wasn't much of a medic, but I decided to stick around in case there was something I could help with.

Which reminded me, there likely was.

"Is it possible to reattach this?" I asked.

"Huh?" One of the assistants turned around at my question, and the moment she took in the sight of me, her eyes went wide. "Why's there a kid holding an arm here?!" Of course she would be surprised. Even I would be surprised if I turned round and suddenly saw a kid standing there holding a detached arm. It sounded like something straight out of a ghost story.

"It hasn't been long since it was cut off, so I think we can work with it," I said. I was using my chi to stop the blood loss while keeping the cells active so the limb would remain fresh. There was a bit of sand on the wound, but it just needed a little wash and it would be fine. "Did you intend to just seal off the wound?"

Before I knew it, the doctor that had been leading the treatment was looking at me with cold eyes. The two assistants who had been frantically dashing around at her orders stopped and stared at our interaction.

"Will you assist?" the doctor calmly asked.

"Of course. If there's anything I can do, that is."

"Lend me that power you're flowing through that arm then."

Oh my, what was this? She hadn't looked strong at first glance, but...

"You can tell?"

“No. But I can see that that arm isn’t in a regular condition right now. There’s no blood coming out the wound even though there’s no tourniquet, and it doesn’t look like it’s starting to decay. I’ve seen this happen once before so I assume it’s something similar.”

It wasn’t as if I had been present on the occasion she was talking about, so I couldn’t confirm whether or not it truly was the same, but the part she had seen through was absolutely correct. I couldn’t say anything about her skill, but she clearly had plenty of experience.

“To confirm, you’ve got the cash for this?” she asked me.

“Cash?”

“If we could treat this using the medicine we have on hand, it’d be cheap, but this is severe enough to require the use of magic—”

“Do it,” I answered immediately. I didn’t need her to be asking such stupid questions right now. If we didn’t hurry up, we wouldn’t be able to reattach the arm. “I’ll pay however much you require.”

It was the duty of the master to look after their student when the situation called for it. It was my selfishness that had led to Lynokis entering the tournament and being injured in such a way, but even if this hadn’t been my fault, my answer wouldn’t have changed. Now wasn’t the time for me to worry about money.

“Really? I’ll hold you to that then.”

Lynokis fell unconscious the second the anesthesia was injected, and that was the signal for treatment to begin.

“*Heal.*” After cleaning the wound and applying a medicine that magic could still penetrate, the doctor chanted a spell. A pale white light enveloped the wound on Lynokis’s arm. Meanwhile, I ran my own external chi along Lynokis’s body in order to control her chi and forcefully speed up the healing process.

The theory behind this was the same as what I’d done to heal my current body’s disease. Human bodies came equipped with natural healing and cleansing abilities from the moment they were born, and chi could strengthen those. If Lynokis had been more proficient at chi manipulation, I was pretty sure

she could've grabbed her arm from the air and attached it back on then and there. I had done that plenty of times in my past life. At least...I think I did.

"Oh," the doctor let out. "It's...already healed."

So it managed to reattach after all.

"Wow, so combining them actually makes it heal much faster, after all," I remarked. Though magic and chi were fundamentally different energies, they could be used together, it seemed.

"More than it being the combination..."

What? Why are you looking at me like that?

"Well, whatever," the doctor sighed. "This isn't a place that looks fondly upon digging into other people's business." She told her assistants to clean up as she walked away and sat herself down at her desk. "Let's talk money. That's the only thing we trust down here."

"Yes, of course. Hm?"

I turned round at the sound of a commotion from outside. Suddenly, the door slammed open and in came a bear of a man.

"And I'm telling you that she's my daughter!"

Ah, Gandolph. Five or six employees and black suits were trying to hold him back, but he barreled through as if they didn't even exist. I...had honestly completely forgotten I had left him behind.

The doctor let out another sigh. "Quiet down, would you? We have a patient resting here. We've completed our treatment, so you can let him through."

"No, no, it is perfectly all right. I had no intention of taking the money anyway." When I was asked about paying for Lynokis's medical fees again, Gandolph immediately whispered into my ear, almost begging me to use the money he had earned from the bets. After all, the price quoted could likely very easily be paid for with what we had won, given the mountain those chips were forming on our table. "I would never spend all that money. I can barely even think of a single good use for it."

Being indebted to someone in the underworld was always a pain, so I chose to accept the money. If I found something else that paid well in the future, I would make sure to notify the man.

“Wow, I thought I’d stated quite the outrageous price, but you can actually pay it?” the doctor said in surprise after I quietly told her of the agreement we had come to. She asked one of her assistants to go fetch the chips for her, since Gandolph had left them behind in his rush here. They were even asked to do the whole process of exchanging the chips for money. *These assistants can’t catch a break, can they?*

And then, with a surprised but joyful laugh, the doctor quickly wrote up an invoice.

“Did you rip me off just now?” I asked with suspicion.

“Yes, and no. Whoever you are, you’ll be quoted an outrageous price from the start. Stay alert, y’hear? This is the infirmary of the Umbral Arena after all.”

Oh, of course. The infirmary would work by the rules of the underground as well. They would squeeze out any and all money they could, even if it was from a contestant. The idea of a fair price didn’t exist here.

“We’ve retrieved the money, doc.”

“Thanks.”

It didn’t take long for the assistants to return.

“Here. You had a bit extra.”

“Th-Thanks,” Gandolph muttered as he accepted his change. The amount left over really was like a kid’s allowance.

“Sign here please. Naturally, fake names are fine. If you *were* an aristocrat, though, I sure wouldn’t mind getting your real one,” the doctor teased, clearly more than aware that Gandolph wasn’t an aristocrat. She had likely guessed that Gandolph and I weren’t related too. “And we’re done. You’re free to take her home now.” And yet, even though we were clearly a suspicious trio, she didn’t dig further. This was the infirmary of the Umbral Arena, after all.

And that was how our night at the arena finally came to a close.

Not wanting to linger, Gandolph and I quickly exited the premises. Gandolph was carrying the unconscious Lynokis on his back. I could've managed it myself, but since he'd offered, I'd decided to leave her to him. Besides, if a small girl was seen carrying a woman on her back while the large man beside her was doing nothing to assist, it would cause some weird looks.

"Master, that final match was incredible!" Gandolph's excitement was yet to abate, even as we swiftly walked down a dark alley to avoid drawing attention.

"Did you enjoy it?"

It seemed like he had taken great joy from watching the standoff between the Sword Demon and me.

"Yes, very much so! If I had been in your position, I would absolutely have been cut down fifty times over!"

"At least dodge one of them."

Fifty strikes was exactly how many that man had swung. I admittedly couldn't envision Gandolph being able to dodge any of those at his current speed, but it was worth praising him for both being aware of that fact and being able to perfectly count just how many swings there had been.

"Something I was a bit curious about... You would've been perfectly capable of fending off his attacks even without the wine bottle, right?" Gandolph asked.

"But of course. In fact, the bottle only made it harder for me."

"That's what I thought!"

"I will tell you the words you want to hear most: nothing is stronger than one's bare hands."

"Absolutely!"

We were both martial artists who had trained solely with our fists, and that meant we had our own biases towards such styles.

"Oh, so they came after us, after all," I muttered, coming to a stop.

Gandolph did the same. "What's wrong?" he asked.

“We have some admirers from the Umbral Arena.” I had directly interfered in an unfinished match. Not for a second had I thought I would be allowed to get away with that. Image was everything down in the underworld, after all. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think they wanted to scout me.”

I could sense the presence of multiple men making their approach. From their speed, they were a pretty competent group. Given how they would periodically pause in their pursuit, they must not have known our exact location yet.

“Gandolph, go back to the bar without me.”

“What? But what about yourself, Master?”

“I’ll go back after I deal with these guys. If we drag them back with us, we’ll only cause Anzel more trouble.”

“Then allow me to—”

“I entrust Lynokis to your care. Please.”

Gandolph could stand his ground fine under ordinary circumstances, but with Lynokis unconscious, she would be at risk. Our pursuers could very easily decide to take her as a hostage. If that happened, I would have no choice but to show a little more force than usual. Dealing with those from the underworld without having a proper plan would bite you in the butt later. If you were going to attack them, you had to be prepared to take them down as thoroughly as possible.

That wasn’t what I wanted to have to do, though. Despite everything that had happened, I had greatly enjoyed myself tonight. I was in an especially good mood. I had been the one to act with an extreme lack of tact and interfered with a fight to the death. That was rude even for me. It was right in the middle of betting too. The last thing I wanted to do was ruin the arena’s reputation even more.

But most importantly, Lynokis’s safety came first.

“I... I understand. I am perfectly aware that if I remain here, I will only get in your way,” Gandolph conceded, a look of reluctance clear on his face as he ran off with Lynokis.

Not long afterwards, a group of men dressed in black suits surrounded me in the alley. And not just in the obvious spaces—there were some inside the buildings, hiding in the shadows, even on the roofs above. There were about ten of them, and they all looked like they specialized in this kind of dirty work.

But what did that matter? I could take them all down easier than crushing an apple with one hand.

“Sorry ’bout that. Did we keep you waiting long?” one of them asked.

Two of them stepped in front of me. One of them looked like an average middle-aged man, nothing distinctive about him at all. You could tell from how he held himself that he wasn’t a fighter. Given his attire, though, he was definitely tied to the arena at least.

The other black-haired man with him looked to be in his midthirties and, in contrast to the first guy, was definitely a martial artist. Was he the leader of the black suits?

“No worries, I haven’t been here for long.” They knew exactly why I was standing waiting here. “So? What do you want?”

“Nothin’ much. Just want you to pay the price is all.”

“The price?”

“Quite the sizable sum of money was bet by our patrons on that Sword Demon, Asuma Hinoki. You messed that match up, so you should be the one to pay the losses.”

Well, that was easy to understand, at least.

“And are you the negotiator?” I asked.

“Yes, indeedy. I’m not a big fan of violence, so I’d be real grateful if you’d give us no fuss. How’s that sound?”

“Not great, if I’m honest. Don’t get me wrong, what you’re saying makes sense. After all, I did selfishly barge into that fight and put a stop to it. I’ll admit that. I really am sorry.”

“C’mon now, little miss, you don’t honestly think that’ll cut it, do you? In the world of grown-ups, a simple ‘sorry’ isn’t enough.”

“But can’t you see I’m still a child? I won’t lie; I was the one who asked to be brought to the arena on a little field trip, but I didn’t intend to involve myself any further.”

“You think that’ll cut it either?”

“Then allow me to ask my own question: is there a reason that it shouldn’t?” I picked up a stone by my feet. “There’s people in this world that you shouldn’t get involved with, right? I view myself as one of those people. Unless...” I took the stone I was toying with and crushed it with my fingers. “You *want* to get involved with me? Really? You won’t regret it?”

I could see the hesitation flash across the negotiator’s face.

Seeing his partner at a loss for words, the martial artist took over. “If you’re able to twist that kind of logic out of this, then you should know that we’ve gotta settle the score, right? In our world, you gotta answer for the things you do. You said sorry, right? And that means you acknowledge you made a mistake. Now own up to it.”

Naturally, I understood that. “Perhaps this is a little crazy coming from me, but I really do think you’re justified in this case. I made you lose face. If you don’t make a good enough show, trust in you will be lost,” I said.

“Not gonna lie, havin’ a kid understand how our side of society works is just creepy,” the martial artist grumbled.

Now don’t be like that. I may have looked like a child, but I was literally an old soul.

“Hmm, I’m in a good mood, but I won’t lie that I do still have a bit of pent-up energy. I don’t mind playing around with you a little.”

“The hell are you on about?”

“You can come at me however you like. If you manage to defeat me... No, if you manage to get even one blow in, I’ll do as you wish. Would that be enough to be considered settling the score for you?”

“What utter bullshit are you spouting?”

Come on, now, aren’t you being a bit slow for someone so experienced with

this side of society?

“I’m saying that I’ll give you one chance, so come at me already. If you don’t want to, I’ll beat you all up and then leave. You have to make sure you settle your score, right? Then you can use this opportunity to do that.” When they didn’t respond, I added, “Shall I dumb it down for you? I’m challenging you to a fight.”

I could feel the hostility starting to emanate from the men surrounding me; it appeared they had finally caught on. That was more like it. They may have been weak, but at least they had guts.

“Don’t blame me if you die, kid.”

Those words were the signal. Their hostility swelled up, and then the whole crew launched their attacks at me like an explosion. I dodged a knife that thrust in from the side, and brushed off the men coming down at me from above with a feint. I directly parried the daggers that came at me in scattered intervals, and deflected a whip that came for my feet with the heel of my shoe.

Their coordinated attack was clean and controlled, clearly well practiced. If a group wasn’t used to fighting together, they would end up getting in the way of each other, and their movements would be shaky; those were times that fighting in a group would make someone who was ordinarily strong much weaker. But this group’s movements were *very* good. The ability to make your move without interfering with anyone else in such large numbers wasn’t something developed in a day. The strength of each individual supported the other and made them only stronger—by about twenty percent if I had to give a rough number.

Superb.

Individually, they were easier to take down than picking fluff off of a sweater, but as a group, they were a very different story. They were significantly stronger. It made them as troublesome as learning correct table manners. If I’d been allowed to retaliate, I would have been fine, but continuing to evade them like this would be difficult. They impressed me, honestly. I was having more fun than I’d thought I would.

“Oh my.”

Their leader had decided to take the stage now. A suntetsu, hm? In his fist he held a spike that was attached to a ring. What an old-fashioned little gizmo.

Laughter bubbled up inside me at the unending assault. I was having fun. I had no expectations for this group, and yet I was having way more fun than I'd ever imagined!

"Heh heh... Ha ha ha!"

Their attacks never ceased, even though the longer the fight continued, the more their impatience and confusion could be felt from every attack. I couldn't help but find it endearing how determined they were to keep it up, even though they were definitely strong enough to feel our difference in strength.

Now then. It was time for me to give them a way out.

At least, that was what I intended to do, but right at that moment...

"Whoa there." I moved when I suddenly felt a different murderous intent that was almost alien in its intensity. I ran up to the negotiator, who was still helplessly standing there, grabbed him by his lapels, and threw him behind me.

"Whoa?! Wh-What's the big id—?!" The man immediately went to shout at me after he finished rolling along the ground, but then he stopped—he'd realized what would've happened if he'd still been standing there.

Yes, if he had remained where he stood, he would've been dead.

"I see, you had a whole separate blade on you," I said to the new assailant. "Now this is absolutely a demon blade."

Asuma Hinoki now stood where the negotiator had just been. In his right hand, he held a tachi. In his left, he held a kodachi. There was an unnatural aura to his presence, and his eyes were empty, not a single shred of sanity left. And on top of that, there was the quiet killing intent. It held a tranquility different to the black suits, different even to his demeanor in the Umbral Arena.

I had seen the tachi at the arena, but the problem child was clearly that kodachi. *That* was truly a demon blade, the kind that took over the mind of its wielder—the type of demon blade I hated most. It wasn't inherently bad, but I wouldn't say it was good either.

“Are you conscious? You aren’t, are you? This is why I hate demon blades.”

A dual-wielding style of both tachi and kodachi—was it in line with the style that the Sword Demon had been training in, or was it a unique form woven from the skills he had acquired over the years?

Even though he had lost his mind, the Sword Demon clearly still remembered who it was he had to cut; he turned towards me, readied his stance, and then immediately jumped at me.

The intent to kill, the step forward, the speed—I had no complaints about any of it. His strikes cascaded down upon me like a torrential downpour, and yet it was quiet, elegant, almost as if his raging killing intent was all a lie.

I see now.

“You’re a bit lacking.”

One hundred strikes.

I avoided the flash of one hundred strikes. Never mind being cut, I wasn’t even scraped.

Naturally. He was a youngster still within the bounds of common sense, however advanced he may have been—why would I *not* be able to evade his attacks? If I was honest, I found the black suits a much more engaging opponent. My interest had completely dissipated.

“GROOOOOOOOOAH!”

The Sword Demon howled. He was no doubt beginning to get angry that he’d slashed so many times and still his opponent had not died. Whether this was the mind of the demon blade or the mind of the Sword Demon, however...

“Are you done? I’ve had enough of martial artists who are so weak they’re used by their weapons.”

He launched his next move. I dodged the slash from his tachi and took the attack from his kodachi with my right hand. There was a light crack. It was the sound of the blade breaking.

“Hmph. I see your blade wasn’t very durable either.”

What a cowardly demon blade. All I had to do was stop it with my palm and it broke. I intended to crush it to a pulp too. And with that, the Sword Demon collapsed. The will of the demon blade had left his mind. Just what exactly had he wanted to do that he'd given his consciousness over to a third-rate weapon?

With that out of the way, on to the next step.

"Shall we continue?"

The Sword Demon had so rudely interrupted, but it was important to not forget that before that, I had been in the middle of settling the score with the black suits. And yet...

"We've... We've seen enough," the leader of the black suits choked out, while his men stood there in a daze. "We've seen enough. Consider our score settled. We'll no longer get involved with you. So you better stay out of our business too. We'll forget about tonight, and we won't search for you or tell a soul about you either."

Hm, it appeared the Sword Demon had in fact turned into the thing that gave them a way out. It had been a disappointment for me though.

"But Dao!" the negotiator protested.

"Stop!" the man yelled back. "Are you blind?! This kid was letting us get away with what we were doing! If we fight any more, then every last one of us here is going to die!"

Exactly. With the effort they'd just been shown, even an amateur could see the difference in strength. That shut the negotiator right up.

"Do you mind if I go now?"

The man silently shook his head. I turned on my heel.

"Oh right. Could you pass on a message to the Sword Demon for me? If he becomes strong enough that I can no longer ignore him, I will visit him myself. Until then, he needs to keep training as much as he physically can."

The leader nodded. "Understood."

With that, I left the alley.

No one followed.

“Mngh...” Lynokis let out a small groan. I turned to look at her just as her eyes fluttered open.

“Are you awake?”

She looked over in my direction. “Young...Mistress.”

“How do you feel? Any dizziness?”

I may have swiftly stopped the bleeding, but that didn’t change the fact that she had lost quite a lot of blood; it wouldn’t be strange if she was suffering from the consequences of that. Her condition wasn’t as bad as mine had been when I was ill, but if she was weak enough that her body rejected food, then it would take a while before she was fully recovered.

Lynokis’s eyes suddenly widened as the initial drowsy fog must have cleared from her mind. She sat up with a sharp inhale, immediately bringing her hand to touch her right arm.

“It’s...still there.” Lynokis rubbed at the limb. Her face showed her disbelief—most likely at the fact that her arm was still attached. “Was I...dreaming?”

“No,” I told her. “You most certainly fought with the Sword Demon at the Umbral Arena, and your arm was in fact cut off. We simply reattached it.”

Lynokis’s present condition didn’t match up with her memories, and it left her thinking our whole night out had been a dream, but that wasn’t the case. However, for a number of reasons, she may have wished more than anything that it *had* all been a dream. If it had all been a dream, then it meant I hadn’t sneaked out to go to an underground arena, she had never entered as a competitor, and therefore, her arm had never been cut off.

If only that was all a dream. That may have been the thought running through her mind.

“Lynokis.” I called for her attention, as she was testing the movement of the limb that, in her mind, shouldn’t have been there. I had to make sure I said this to her: “I’m sorry.”

Those simple words had her turning to look at me.

“I didn’t think you would go so far in order to stop or protect me. I should’ve sat down and had a proper conversation with you and come to a conclusion that we were both content with. I feel a lot of regret for what I’ve done.”

Her fight with the Sword Demon was a nonissue—I had nothing to criticize about that. I wanted to praise her efforts to the high heavens for putting on such a brilliant display, a show befitting of my student. There, I saw nothing for her to be embarrassed about. But if the reason that she had taken on that match was entirely because of me, that changed everything.

Had it been a match that Lynokis herself desired, then fine. Even if it were to end in death, to die in a battle you yourself wanted would be a martial artist’s true desire, at least in my opinion. But I was the root cause of that match. Since she couldn’t find a way to remain by my side in the usual way—but still wanted to carry out her duties as my bodyguard—she’d done what she could to be scouted for the tournament in order to get access to the arena. Her fight with the Sword Demon was a result of that necessity.

If Lynokis had been an established martial artist, I would tell her to accept any challenge from any martial artist anywhere. You can lose, but don’t die. If you’re about to be killed, then you should kill first. But she was my trainee. I didn’t desire such an extreme mindset from her. In fact, it would be cruel to press that upon her.

“But...I’m the one who ended up causing you trouble instead,” Lynokis said dejectedly.

“Well, you aren’t wrong.”

“Wha—?”

“You’re my student. I would’ve preferred you to win against someone of that level.”

Lynokis only looked at me, stunned.

“I took him down after you were defeated. With a wine bottle. In one shot.”

“Young Mistress, I believe it would only be appropriate for you to be a bit more apologetic.”

Hm? Whatever for?

“You believe you are at fault, yes?” Lynokis continued.

“Yes.”

“I still haven’t accepted your apology yet, you know?”

“What? Really?”

“Do you not think you should apologize until I do? There are times where the other person is just trying to be humble.”

“You were trying to be humble?”

“Yes! Of course I was! What choice do I have?!”

What did she mean by that? Why was she suddenly so worked up?

“It would feel wrong to suddenly accept your apology right away! As your personal attendant, it is far more beautiful for me to demur two or three times, and then after you strongly insist that you were in the wrong, I would finally reluctantly concede that perhaps you had fault in the matter! That is what a servant is! It is not an occupation in which I can openly show disagreement in such a way! Think about the other person’s position! Be considerate!”

I didn’t quite understand what she meant. Why not just make your point as directly as she was doing right now? What was wrong with that?

“Going up against someone wielding a sword while unarmed is frightening! And yet I did that! I did that for you! I even had my arm cut off! You’re supposed to apologize over and over and I’m supposed to be humble about it, and then you’re supposed to praise me!”

I had absolutely no idea what she was going on about. Was she delirious? Maybe all the blood loss was getting to her.

“Come here! Now!”

What?

“You should come and sleep beside me! After everything that happened, you should be okay with that! I tried so hard that you should be okay with that! Sleep beside me! Co-sleep with me!”

“You know...if you’re this worked up, maybe you’re already feeling better.”

“I’m not better! Absolutely not! Now get up here!”

Yeah, she was definitely fine. She was back to her usual suspicious antics—she was more than fine.

I’m relieved.

Lynokis making me feel a bit of anxiety or disbelief was business as usual. Being relieved that I felt disbelief towards my own servant did feel a little strange though.

“Can you stand? You can sulk all you want later.”

“I’m not sulking!”

No, she was absolutely sulking like a little child.

“I was hoping you would realize by now, but since you clearly haven’t, this isn’t the dorms.”

“It is the dor— Wait, what?”

It is in fact not the dorms. Take a look around.

We couldn’t remain at the Umbral Arena forever, and it wasn’t somewhere I wanted to linger anyway. I’d ended up standing out because of the incident with the Sword Demon, so we left the second we’d settled the medical fees with the doctor.

After Lynokis’s treatment, I’d asked Gandolph to carry her back to the Shifty Shadow Rat for me. We’d been followed from the arena, as I had expected. They’d seemed satisfied after I’d played around with them a little, so it was unlikely to cause us issues later. After that, I’d made my way back to the bar. Lynokis was currently sulking in Anzel’s bed.

“Just so you’re aware, it’s already dawn. We need to get back to the academy,” I said. The sun would be rising soon.

After we’d returned my hair color back to normal, I had sat beside Lynokis, waiting for her to awaken, all while trying my best not to give in to the sleep that my six-year-old body desired.

A child would grow as they slept; their need for sleep was tremendous. If any other kid had been in my place, they'd have fallen fast asleep ages ago. I had been very close to leaving if Lynokis showed no signs of waking up soon. There was always at least Anzel or Fressa at the bar, so I would've felt safe leaving her in their care.

"I understand. We'll continue this after we return home then," Lynokis conceded.

She still intends to drag this out? I didn't want to see my own personal attendant—who was older than me—sulking and throwing a selfish tantrum in bed. *It's fine. Well, it's not, but it's not worth fretting over for now.* We really did need to start making our way back. The lighter it was outside, the more likely we were to get caught sneaking in.

"If you can stand, let's go home together. If not, I'll go home ahead of you and you can rest here."

"I can manage," she insisted. Though a bit shaky on her feet, Lynokis managed to stand herself up. She needed rest, but she would no doubt feel much more comfortable in her own bed. If she seemed like she would struggle to make it all the way back, I could have Gandolph carry her again.

I left the room with Lynokis and headed for the bar.

"All good now?"

The bar had already long since closed, and Anzel, Fressa, and Gandolph were sitting around a table having a drink together. It exuded the atmosphere of an adult gathering.

"Sorry, Anzel. We intruded for much longer than I intended," I said.

"You sure did. Ended up settling with a sharper nightcap than usual 'cause of you."

You're just making me jealous. I want a drink before bed as well. Though this body can sleep without one.

"Let me introduce you all while we're here. This is my personal attendant. I'd

prefer to keep her name private, same as my own, but if anything comes up, I will likely end up asking her to pass on messages for me. Do remember her.”

“It’s nice to *meet* you, everyone. I am the young mistress’s personal attendant. It is an absolute *pleasure* to make your acquaintance.”

“Yeah... A pleasure.” For some reason, Anzel’s response was slightly stilted, and he looked as if he wanted to say something more. The tone of Lynokis’s voice as she introduced herself was strange, but their exchange ended there.

“Let’s go then.” We had no further business there, given my hair was already turned back. Gandolph had changed out of his tight-fitting suit into his regular clothes, so he nodded, downed the rest of the amber liquid swirling in his glass, and stood up, still steady on his feet. He hadn’t partaken in any of the wine he’d been served at the Umbral Arena, but it seemed like that wasn’t because he couldn’t hold his drink.

“Thanks for the drink, Anzel. Night, Fressa,” Gandolph said.

“Any time.”

“See you later!”

I still wanted to discuss what we had seen at the arena with Anzel, but time was of the essence. After giving my own brief thanks to the pair, we took off running back to the school.

Reliared was exasperated at me yawning away at the desk beside her.

“You seem tired.”

The day after that thrilling night at the Umbral Arena, I attended school as if all was normal. We had returned just in the nick of time, so I had no choice but to greet the new day with barely any sleep.

“I don’t just seem tired, I *am* tired.”

The lethargy was only made worse by being in a child’s body. I was so tired that if it had been anyone else, they would’ve collapsed on the spot.

“Were you so worked up after the tournament yesterday you couldn’t sleep?”

Wait, what?! Oh... Yeah.

“I suppose so.”

Reliared appeared to have misunderstood and assumed that I was still worked up from the *school's* martial arts tournament like everyone else. My field trip to the Umbral Arena had been on the night of the martial arts tournament that all the students were still so excited about. Only a day had passed, so naturally, everyone was still talking about it. Reliared, unaware of the true reason for my tiredness, understandably thought I was the same.

Honestly, the Umbral Arena hadn't been that exciting either, but... Well, I wouldn't deny I at least got *some* fun out of it.

For the first time in a while...or well, since my past life, I'd gotten the chance to see a demon blade, fill my chest with the overwhelming scent of fresh blood, and get another little taste of that feeling of my instincts and flesh buzzing. The attack from the assassins wasn't bad either—it had given me a little excitement. I did have my complaints, but it wasn't a bad night.

“Why not take a nap once we get back?” Reliared suggested.

“Perhaps I'll do just that.”

We had arranged a half day with the school, so there were only morning classes today. The recording of the martial arts tournament would be broadcast in the afternoon. The reason the children were still so excited had to be because they were looking forward to seeing the tournament again through magivision. Plus, even though a lot of them had come to see the tournament directly, many wouldn't have been able to watch all of the matches. Inevitably, some of the competitors would be in the same boat.

“We should buy some snacks.”

“Let's make sure we go for a bathroom break before it starts.”

“Get ready to watch how cool I am!”

Such chatter filled the air, all of the students aware that once they started watching, they wouldn't be able to look away. How excited they were depended on the person, but all attention was on the topic. Good. If this was

the reaction the event elicited, we'd probably get an increase in MagiPad sales in the near future.

It must have been tough for the staff at the broadcasting station to edit the footage this quickly. No doubt they'd had to pull an all-nighter as well.

After our lessons filled with restless students ended, I returned to the dorms with Reliared. It was a rare sight to see the girl aristocrats' dorm so frantic. It seemed everyone was quickly preparing tea and snacks and finishing any odd jobs they had left to do before it was time to settle down in front of the MagiPad in the lobby area—they were all making sure they wouldn't have to move once the broadcast started.

"Who wants pancakes?" Carme called. She seemed just as busy as the kids were.

"Meeeeeee!" a number of the girls responded.

Pancakes, hm? I'd like some myself, honestly.

Thanks to my and Reliared's connections, we had our own MagiPads, as did a number of the other children from families of a higher class, so we could watch the broadcast in our rooms if we wished. But I didn't think the atmosphere would be quite the same watching it privately.

"Want to watch with them?" Reliared asked. She was more attuned to this kind of thing than anyone, so she was completely on board with the idea. She probably wanted to enjoy the highs and lows of the matches along with everyone.

"Sorry, but I can't. I'll fall asleep in the middle." Hildetaura had gone around interviewing spectators and introducing the matches during the tournament, so I was interested to see how she did, but right now, I was so sleepy—*horribly* sleepy. I'd probably fall asleep in three seconds if I dared sit down. Hell, I'd probably fall asleep *standing up* if I wasn't careful.

"Are you that tired?"

Yes.

This child's body was begging for sleep. I naturally wanted to watch; the editors would've worked to a really tight schedule, staying up overnight to put together the tournament footage. Of course I'd want to watch the product of their hard work. But my drowsiness was overpowering even that desire right now, so I chose sleep without hesitation. They'd no doubt rerun it again later, so I could afford to miss it for now.

When I returned to my room, Lynokis was asleep...

...in my bed.

"I mean, I did say to rest, but..."

You've lost a lot of blood, so get plenty to eat and then rest. That was what I had told her this morning before I left. But I'd said nothing about sleeping in *my* bed. Not a single word.

I'm not entirely sure what she's planning here... I didn't particularly want to ask either, but seeing how pale she looked even though she was sleeping peacefully, I'd feel terrible forcing her awake or rolling her off my bed.

"Guess we'll need to sleep together..."

I couldn't help but call to mind Lynokis begging to sleep in the same bed last night. Or I supposed it was this morning. That must have been what she was silently telling me to do now. What a troublesome little student.

"Hup."

"Gwuh?!"

I made sure to give her a little punch in the gut so she wouldn't wake up while I was sleeping.

Oh, the whites of her eyes were showing now. How peaceful. At least she wouldn't wake up for a while now. I had no idea why she was so obsessed with me, but I granted her wish and slept in the same bed for the night.

Asuma Hinoki

A swordsman possessed by the will of a demon blade. He became an adventurer to cut down lives. He's quite skilled for someone born in an era of peace.

Age:

26 years old

Title/Occupation:

Adventurer

Alias:

Kenki/Sword Demon

Favored fighting style:

Demon blade

Where were you born?

"In the countryside of Musashikai."

Where did you acquire your demon blade?

"It was offered up at a forgotten shrine."

"Are you allowed to kill at this Umbral Arena of yours?"



Chapter 8: The Approach of Summer

“Much of the data has now been compiled, so allow me to share it with you,” Hildetaura announced. We waited with bated breath.

A week had passed since the school tournament. It had been broadcast and also rebroadcast several times, and at long last, the excitement was starting to fade. We had all gathered in Reliared’s room as per usual in order to discuss the results of our efforts. For us, this data was the main reason we had carried out the whole project.

The magivision broadcast of the tournament had been received well, and even though it had been broadcast more than once already, there were still students saying they wanted to see it again. It was fine for the audience to just enjoy the show, but we were much more concerned with the statistics. That event had been part of Project Magivision, our mission to promote magivision around the country. Our strategy going forward would entirely depend on how successful this had been.

“I can proudly say that we have achieved the best results we possibly could have at this stage.”

Reliared and I both let out sighs of relief. If even Hildetaura believed the results were the best they could be, that would mean our plan had worked.

According to the data, the broadcast of the tournament had received good praise. Everything we had done beforehand had been well received, so this result was to be expected. However, like with any battle, you could never truly predict the outcome of a match until the end. Sometimes, a coincidentally well-timed strike could be the decisive blow against a superior opponent. There was no such thing as luck in martial arts, but there were uncertain factors such as the fighters’ concentration, physical condition, pride, self-confidence, or flow of chi that could affect the result.

If it was like that even in the martial world, what hope did I have of being able to read the trends and data of an unfamiliar field?

“I’m relieved,” Reliared said, finally taking a sip of the tea Esuella had poured for her.

“Indeed. Now we can return home with some peace of mind,” I said, taking a drink of my own lukewarm tea for my parched throat. We had both been so concerned with the results that we hadn’t felt the desire to drink the tea or eat the cookies that had been served with them until Hildetaura gave us the news.

What? I was meant to put jam on the cookies because they were made with less sugar? *Ah... Much sweeter.*

It wouldn’t be long until summer vacation started. Many of the students would be returning home, Reliared and me included. In consideration of me moving to Altoire and having to get used to student life, I’d had fewer scheduled recordings at the start of the school year, but recently, they’d picked up in frequency again. Reliared seemed to be the same, and Hildetaura’s frequent recordings hadn’t ever changed. The princess was the one most busy with magivision business out of all of us.

“It seems this is our limit for one semester, after all,” Hildetaura said. I had already heard that any on-campus recordings would be going on break for now. More specifically, we would be stopping until after summer vacation. We were all busy with our own schedules, and we needed time to think of the next step for Project Magivision. We had managed to successfully hold the martial arts tournament, but the project itself was so big that it hadn’t been some simple thing to plan. “It appears to be good timing too. I have heard that the school’s production crew is going to go study with the broadcasting station.”

By the school’s production crew, she probably meant the improvised student crew that she had put together for the tournament. Apparently, some higher-up who had been editing the ragtag team’s footage had suddenly said that they would put the crew through some serious training over the summer break by letting them do part-time work there.

What had started as a group of amateurs had, over the course of the recording for the tournament, turned into a group of students who started to view their task as something professional. That change alone was proof they had room to grow. Depending on their growth, the things we would be capable

of would increase. I couldn't help but have high hopes for them.

While I was listening to Hildetaura speak about the sales of the MagiPads, and the letters and fan letters that had been sent to the broadcasting station, Lynokis stepped forward and whispered in my ear. "Young Mistress, you haven't forgotten what we discussed, have you?"

What we discussed? Ah, of course. It had slipped my mind for a moment, but there was something I had planned to mention to Hildetaura the next time I saw her.

"Say, Hilde. I'd like to say my hellos to the staff of the capital's broadcasting station."

As I was still busy with the work in my own domain, I had yet to pick up any work directly from the capital. I'd been thinking for a while now that there would be situations in the future in which we may be called to work there, so I'd like to at least get my proper greetings in. Introductions were the basis of forming connections, after all.

"Ah, I'd like to go too," Reliared said. She must have been thinking the same. We'd been so busy recently it must have slipped her mind as well.

"Your hellos? Would I be right in understanding that as you would like to meet the chairman?"

Um...?

"Wait." Both Reliared and I realized the same thing at the exact same time.

"Is the chairman of the capital's broadcasting station...the king?" Reliared tentatively asked.

Right, that was exactly what I was thinking. The director of the Liston Broadcasting Station was the land's lord, my father. The director of the Silver Broadcasting Station was their land's lord, Reliared's father. Following that train of thought...

"No, you appear to be misunderstanding."

Oh, thank god. A child going to introduce themselves to the king was a *bit* much, even for me.

“The director is the previous king, my grandfather.”

Well...that was at least a *little* easier than meeting the current king.

“But if I am to be truthful, my grandfather is more like a figurehead. We simply use his name for our benefit. He is not particularly someone you need to introduce yourself to.”

That was unexpected.

“Then whom do you think we should meet?” I asked directly. We didn’t know the inner workings of the capital’s broadcasting station, so I’d rather she just tell us outright.

“Hmm, I would say either the second prince who currently serves as the acting chairman of the company or the managing director who oversees the production crews,” Hildetaura said.

“Let’s go with the chairman,” Reliared immediately responded.

“Yes, I think we should go with the chairman,” I agreed just as quickly.

Royalty was a pain to deal with. Even Hildetaura, who was around our age and was doing the same work as us, had been a pain at first.

“Hee hee, are you that opposed to meeting another member of royalty?” Hildetaura chuckled.

“No, it’s just... It makes me a bit nervous to meet with someone so important is all,” Reliared said, a forced smile on her face.

“But we are really quite relaxed, if you ask me. Though that may be the reason that aristocrats are looked at so lightly by the common people.” So it wasn’t just Hildetaura that was this amiable. “Those of royal status are still human too. We are not so different as people assume,” she continued, spreading some berry jam on a cookie, and putting it all in her mouth at once.

It was a small cookie, but it was still a little big for a child’s mouth. She shoved it all between her cheeks, making her look like a squirrel storing chestnuts. Perhaps this was her way to show how playful the royal court really was.

“You can say that because they’re your relatives. I’d still find them hard to meet... Right, Nia?”

What Reliared said was the truth. However...

“Our status may be different, but never forget that he is just as human as us,” I said.

“I can acknowledge that, but—”

“Even a king will bleed if you beat him up.”

Relia looked stunned. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying that no matter how important a person is, they’re still human. If you beat them up, they bleed, just like we do. Right?”

“You can’t beat up someone so important! Especially not to the point that they bleed!”

“I would think it depends on the situation. Personally, if there is a justified reason to punch someone, I believe it’s okay to punch them.”

“Of course it’s not okay! You can’t just punch the *king*! Miss Hilde, Nia’s being incredibly rude!”

What about it was rude? If I were in a situation where I felt I was justified to punch the king, then he must have said something far worse than what I was saying right now. It would be like adding a punch to give a bit more oomph to your advice to a loyal subject.

“But is she wrong? The king *is* still human. If you punch him or stab him, he will still bleed,” Hildetaura said.

“Why are you agreeing with her?!” Reliared exclaimed in exasperation. “Let’s stop talking about this already! Of course anyone would bleed if they were stabbed!”

“Do you not get worked up when you see blood?” I asked.

“I do not! Wait...is this you telling us you’re actually going to punch the king?!”

“Blood aside, I do in fact get excited at the prospect of harming the king,” Hildetaura openly admitted.

“Miss Hilde?! This is your father you’re talking about here!”

“So? I think I should be allowed to talk this way about that cheat of a man. He will always say that he is too busy to see his children, but he apparently has the free time to go visit another woman. He may be proficient as a king, but as a father, he is the absolute worst.”

Oh no. I really did not want to touch on that topic. In fact, we *shouldn't* touch on that topic. All that awaited us if we got involved with royalty's family troubles was a massive headache.

“Nia.”

The sun had long since set, and the night sky was twinkling with stars. Waiting for me as I left the dorm was my brother, Neal.

“Good evening, brother. Even under the night sky, your beauty shines.”

Perhaps it was because our schedules were so different, but even though our classes were in the same building, I rarely bumped into my brother. This was the first time we had met in a while.

“Thank you. I see your hair is as white as ever.”

He was right, it *was* white. And it didn't seem as if it was going to turn back anytime soon. On a related note, my brother's witty retorts were starting to improve. Perhaps this was the biggest reminder that he wouldn't remain a child forever. To be more precise, it was a sign that he had been the subject of many battles because of his good looks. Apparently, the volume of fan letters had dramatically increased again after the martial arts tournament.

That realization was sad in its own way. It was natural that he wouldn't be a child forever; both his mind and his body would continue to grow. But I was left watching those endearing childish qualities disappearing from him day after day. He would continue to grow up into a man that would make both men and women cry. It was tragic, honestly. My brother was going to become quite the heartbreaker.

“The airship is ready to take off,” Neal informed me. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, I've finished preparing everything I need.”

I had made sure to go visit the chairman of the capital's broadcasting station before heading home. I had informed the Heavenstriker instructor, Gandolph, as well as Anzel and Fressa at the Shifty Shadow Rat that I would be away. I had even managed to meet up with the Twin Princes of the Ice Rose, Julian and Lucida, and their up-and-coming actress Sharro, whom I had become acquainted with through my performance in *The Girl Who Fell in Love*. Now that I had become a regular at the Chocolate Lily's Aroma after visiting for *Occupation Observation*, I had also made sure to inform the head chef I would be absent for a while.

With all of that out of the way, it would be fine for me to leave the capital for a month.

Summer vacation started tomorrow, after all.

Our journey home would consist of boarding the airship while it was still dark, and then arriving at the Liston territories in the morning. By leaving at night, we could avoid the times when the port was busiest. It seemed that aristocrats and their children preferred travel times when there were no public or cargo airships going in and out of the area. I could understand how they felt.

We boarded my brother's vintage airship, and rather than going straight to sleep, we sat and drank tea under the starlight, deciding to have a bit of a midnight chat. We spoke about the martial arts tournament, about my brother's achievements during the martial arts tournament, about my brother's rising popularity since the martial arts tournament, about the many passionate fan letters my brother had received since the martial arts tournament...

"Actually...maybe we should just sleep," Neal said.

All I was trying to do was raise a topic that I knew we could both talk about, but it seemed I had accidentally hit a sore spot for him. My brother's dazzling good looks had a shadow cast over them as I saw him off—I decided I may as well retire to my own room, as well.

Could he still not forget the contents of the fan letters he had received over a year ago? Were the contents of the current fan letters what was troubling him now? Whatever the case, my brother was a sensitive soul; I hoped he wasn't trying to carry the weight of that burden on his shoulders alone. If he confided

in me, I could help him come up with a solution.

There wasn't a lot I could do right now though. Tomorrow was the beginning of summer vacation. I had already gotten so used to the girls' dorm, but I would now be spending over a month away from there. My work schedule was packed, but I'd also arranged some personal leisure activities, so I was actually quite looking forward to my first summer break.

The next morning, we arrived at our mansion as planned.

"Welcome back."

The servants of the house were gathered to greet us for the first time in months as we made it back home safely.

Reliared Silver

Captivated by Nia Liston's work on magivision, this young girl dove right into her own magivision career. Though strong-willed and competitive, she is also honest and straightforward. She has the common sense of the group, and is an all-round good kid.

Age:

6 years old

Title/Occupation:

Fourth daughter of the Silver family
(aristocrats of the fifth class)

Favored fighting style:

Weaponless; she currently trains in the Heavenstriker style, but her strength is fitting for someone of her age.

In what ways do you think you can win against Nia?

"Cuteness, charm, and affability!"

Do you believe in love at first sight?

"Yes!"

"Ah, you just thought of something violent again, didn't you?"



Epilogue

“It’s been a long time since we’ve been back here,” I said as we entered my room. It hadn’t changed at all since the time I had left. I wasn’t really sleepy, yet a part of me *felt* tired, and so I threw my body onto my bed. Actually, when I tried to close my eyes a bit, I could feel myself being tempted by sleep, so perhaps I *was* a bit tired.

“Would you like some tea?” Lynokis offered.

“Yes, please.”

Lynokis began preparing the tea with trained hands. It was almost time for lunch, so I took no snacks with it. I was getting quite sleepy, but I couldn’t take a nap right after returning home, so I sluggishly pushed myself off the bed and sat myself down at the table.

“Is it really okay for you to stay here and not return home?” I asked. The servants who accompanied children to the academy were required to almost constantly be by their charge. They had not a single moment to return home during the semester. Therefore, it was the norm for them to use the time during longer holiday periods like the summer and winter breaks to take their own vacation and return home. I had asked Lynokis about it when I first heard that was the case, but I thought I would ask again to be sure.

“Oh, it’s fine. We exchange letters all the time anyway.” The response was exactly the same as when I had asked her the first time. “Plus, I’m worried about you. So worried I don’t feel as if I can take my eyes off of you for even a second.” That was also what she had followed her response up with the first time.

Lynokis had become even more overprotective ever since our trip to the Umbral Arena. I only had myself to blame for that one though.

“Also, I still haven’t had the chance to sleep in the same bed as you.”

“I’ve told you over and over, we already have. You just weren’t awake.”

“And I’ve thought about it over and over—that just makes no sense to me. How could you have slept beside me without me waking up? It’s unthinkable.”

“Because of the blood loss, no? You *did* just have your arm cut off.” And I had maybe possibly punched her hard enough that she had fallen even deeper into unconsciousness.

“Something is definitely strange here...”

Over a month had passed since that incident already—Lynokis really was stubborn. Honestly, if she kept being so obsessed with the idea of co-sleeping with me, I’d only end up even more scared of her... But at least she was the same old suspicious attendant that I knew and loved.

After having lunch in the mansion, I wandered into the garden and watched Neal and Lynette train, occasionally giving advice here and there. Since they were using wooden swords, there wasn’t a whole lot I could add though. In fact, given it was a style of a completely different school, I shouldn’t have been saying anything at all. Lynette was skilled herself, so I was just getting in the way, really. Unnecessary comments would make her job harder.

Lynokis used to wield a sword, but ever since she started training under me, she had gone almost entirely weaponless—the one exception was a small dagger she carried for self-defense. I personally didn’t care all that much whether or not I was armed at any given time. I...had a feeling the style I’d trained in in my past life wasn’t so strict with form. It was a flexible style that let me adjust depending on my opponent and my circumstances.

There were times I used weapons when I deemed it necessary; that was why I knew how to cut a branch in half with a wooden sword. Though it was definitely easier to do with a knifehand than it was with a weapon.

Anyway, I definitely felt as if Neal and Lynette had both gotten stronger since the last time I had observed their training sessions.

“You’re doing well, brother. I can see your improvement,” I complimented.

“You *really* love acting like you’re older than me, don’t you?”

I couldn’t help it! I technically was older if you included my past life, *and* I was more skilled at martial arts.

The sight of our home's garden in the summer hadn't changed much from when I was still using a wheelchair to get around. It was almost nostalgic. But there was one thing that had most certainly changed.

"Young Mistress Nia, may I request a training session with you?"

Lynette had begun requesting that I train her.

"Wait, Lynette, me first."

As had Neal.

I really did not expect them to ask me directly to guide them.

"Lynokis, spar with them, would you?" I told her. It was the student's job to take the first challenge, after all. While she did so, it gave me the opportunity to point out where they needed to improve.

"Try narrowing the length of your step when you go to strike. If your opponent is unarmed, make use of the reach of your weapon. Aiming for just the tip of the sword to strike can be enough."

Just how much stronger would Neal and Lynette become? A secret new reason for me to look forward to my summer vacation had revealed itself.

Afterword

Hello, Umikaze Minamino here. Thank you for reading volume 2 of *Nia Liston: The Merciless Maiden*.

It has finally been released. The book kept getting delayed because of various circumstances, but at long last, it was published. I hope it can fill another space on your bookshelves, even if it's just at the edges.

I don't have many pages to write the afterword this time, so I can't ramble as I did in the last volume. I wanted to apologize for the misleading things I had said when I spoke about not knowing about Hololive and Nijisanji, and I also wanted to talk about the things I'd done to support a conveyor belt sushi place I like, but they aren't very important so I'll leave them out this time.

Ah, I am really sorry about what I said about the VTubers though, so I'd like to take the opportunity to apologize for that. I realized that if I'm not more careful with my words I could cause misunderstandings. I'm cheering for the fairies doing their best in the electric sea. I'm thankful for all the fun times they've shown me.

JISHAKU-sensei has drawn some wonderful illustrations yet again; thank you very much. A girl wearing a school uniform is kind of nice. I think it's great. If there were a like button, I'd be smashing that over and over. It's good.

To Kodai-sensei, I'm always looking forward to your updates to the manga version of *Nia Liston*. The first volume of the manga will be releasing at around the same time as this second volume of the light novel. It's really fun. Please check it out.

To my editor, S-san, thank you for all your help again. You definitely had more issues to iron out than I did, but it was all thanks to you I was able to get this published. I look forward to continuing to work with you.

To all my readers, it's thanks to you that I was able to release this second volume. Thank you so much. And to my delight, it's been finalized that I will be

publishing a third volume as well. This and that scene of Nia's, Lynokis's strange remarks, the efforts of both the charming and the not-so-charming side cast members, and a whole bunch of other events... The next volume will be filled to the brim with that kind of thing.

I don't know what else to say other than there's a lot to look forward to!

Let us meet again in the next volume.

Bonus Short Stories

To the Liston Estate

Our journey home would consist of boarding the airship while it was still dark and then arriving at the Liston territories in the morning. Summer vacation started tomorrow, after all.

I was absolutely *pooped*.

“At least that’s one semester down,” I said.

“Indeed.”

My first semester at Altoire Academy had come to an end. The reality of that finally sunk in when I settled down in my own personal room on the airship with Lynokis.

Summer vacation would begin tomorrow, and that meant I got almost a whole month away from school. Though, given my schedule was packed full of recordings, could it really be called a vacation? But there were still things I was looking forward to, so I just needed to focus on those things to help me through the busy period.

“A lot certainly happened in just one semester. It was your first time at school, and your first time living in a dorm too. Was there not a lot that caught you by surprise, Young Mistress?”

Lynokis was absolutely right. In only about a hundred days, so much had occurred.

“Like your arm getting cut off?”

“Like you sneaking off to an underground arena?”

“You could’ve at least won against an opponent as weak as he was.”

“We still haven’t settled that matter of co-sleeping, by the way. And I won’t ever forget it.”

But I did co-sleep with you! What a stubborn student.

While I was lazing about in the room, there was a knock on the door. “Nia,” a child’s voice called.

“Open the door, Lynokis.”

“Yes, Young Mistress.”

Lynokis did as I instructed, revealing Neal standing there.

“It’s a bit early to sleep, right? Would you like to gaze at the stars with me?”

Would you like to gaze at the stars with me?

“Would you like to gaze at the stars with me,” huh?

“What a poetic invitation.”

Not only was my brother beautiful, but he was also skilled with his words. I couldn’t help but wonder if this boy was born for the sole purpose of breaking girls’ hearts.

“I wasn’t really trying to be poetic; it’s just that on an airship, you can see the stars up close at night.”

A fitting time for some stargazing, I supposed. I wasn’t all that interested in the stars, but it *was* a little too early to sleep.

“Well, since you’ve invited me, I might as well. We never really got the chance to sit and chat during the semester, after all.” Though we lived on the same campus, our dorms were different, our years were different, and we had our own lives to live, so we never really had a reason to meet up. We’d bumped into each other a few times, but never for long enough that we could have a conversation of any substance. Plus, Neal was always surrounded by people.

“Lynokis, you’re welcome to rest when you please,” I told her. It seemed likely that Neal and I would end up discussing things that we’d rather keep among family.

“What? But...”

“We’re on an airship that’s currently in flight; do you really think we need a bodyguard?” The only ones on this ship were people we knew. Even Neal had

come to see me without Lynette.

“You’re right, but...” Lynokis didn’t look terribly happy about it, but I was getting a little tired of her both physically and mentally, so I wanted some time away.

I went with my brother to the mess hall and we sat ourselves down at a window table. The lighting in the mess hall had already been dimmed so we could see the stars more clearly, and the starlight filtering in through the window was already quite bright. We had the server prepare some tea and then asked them to excuse themselves.

“Wow.” The sky was clear today, so there were no clouds obscuring our view. The stars twinkled brightly in the endless darkness. I could see so many of them, as if a jewelry box had toppled over, and its jewels were scattered everywhere. It really was quite the pretty sight.

Stars, hm... Perhaps stargazing here and there wasn’t so bad. I had a feeling I enjoyed drinking sake under the moon in my past life. Then again, in those moments, the sake was probably more important to me than the moon.

“Do you know about the constellations?” my brother asked.

“I know which star points north and which points south, I suppose?”

Neal laughed at my vague understanding. “Not that interested?”

“Perhaps?” I had no interest, but my brother had invited me out so poetically, so I wanted to at least let him have his moment. Thankfully, he seemed to have caught on to my true feelings and decided against talking about the stars.

“Oh right, you got sixth in the tournament, didn’t you?” I asked, changing the subject.

“I think I did quite well, personally.”

I agreed. My brother was only eight years old, and yet he managed to get sixth in a tournament that also included middle school students. He should be proud. “The crowd got so excited for every single one of your matches.”

Though all the participants were children, a small child beat larger and larger

competitors. Plus, Neal was cute. It made for an exceedingly good recording. Best of all, the unexpected outcomes got everyone talking—even days later, people were still mentioning his matches.

“So I hear. I’ve had a lot of people reach out to me. But I didn’t even manage to get in the top five. It was a lackluster result. There’s no reason for this to get people talking.” So when he said he thought he did quite well, he only meant it as a personal achievement. That was a great mindset. If he wasn’t satisfied with his current state, then that would mean he would keep up his training. “And besides, if you’d entered, you’d have easily won it all, right? People wouldn’t even have spared me a glance.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I had no interest in bullying children. Just what would be fun about entering and winning a *children’s* tournament?

“Though if you had entered, I probably wouldn’t have,” Neal admitted. It was a smart choice. Though I wouldn’t have entered even if everyone expected me to.

“There’s still next year, brother. I’m sure you’ll at least get into the top five then.”

“You plan to hold one next year too? I heard this one was quite spontaneous.”

“We probably will, yes. This one was a resounding success, so there’s no reason not to hold another.” Results like these served as steps to the next stage. What was the point in creating stairs only to not go up them? We should take advantage of them to their fullest in order to promote magivision as widely as possible.

“Anyway, your female friends have increased, haven’t they?” I asked. “Have you made any of them cry?”

“Of course not. You’re...right that they’ve increased, though.”

So they *had* increased. I thought so. It was only natural—the tournament no doubt served as one big advertisement for him.

“So? Do you have a partner? Or someone you’d want as a partner? No? Or are you already cheating on someone?”

“Isn’t it a bit early to be thinking about all that...?”

He was eight, so yes, it was. But I wouldn’t be surprised if he had someone already. Or two. Or three. Any more than that and I may have been a bit worried for his future. Bad habits like that should be broken early, before he became a playboy. But if it was true that he thought it was too early to be considering a partner, then I didn’t think there was much to worry about for now. *Keep growing just as you are, brother.*

“That tournament...was aired all over Altoire, right?” Neal suddenly asked.

“Hm?”

“I’m just a bit curious about how the masses reacted to it. Yeah, everyone was talking about it in school, but what about on the outside?” My brother’s face was solemn as he brought up the topic, and I understood exactly why.

“Your fans may have increased?”

My brother was silent and kept his eyes on the stars.

“And you might get more fan letters?”

“Never mind. Pretend I didn’t bring it up.”

Fans and the letters from said fans were exactly why he tried to distance himself from magivision in the first place, after all. And when I said fan letters, I meant the kind that contained glimpses—or far more than just glimpses—of adult desires or other content that may harm a child’s mind. I could handle it fine, but my brother was sensitive.

“It’ll be fine, brother. You just need to become strong enough you can bounce back from anything. Strength is the power to protect oneself. Power solves everything, so you should desire power.”

“Power...? You’re right. I keep being the one relying on you, but one day, I want to be able to help with your magivision work too.” Though that face gazing up at the stars still retained his childish youth, there was something gallant about it now. It was a face filled with resolve. “I have to get stronger. Not just in body, but in mind and spirit too.”

He really was adorable.

“I do think you should hurry up and find a partner, though. I’m not kidding.”

“What are you talking about?”

In the end, his lack of awareness was his biggest problem.

He sighed. “But when we get home...there’s definitely gonna be a ton of fan letters waiting for me...”

Oh no, he was getting gloomy now.

The vintage airship swam through the night air.

Tomorrow, we would arrive at the Liston Estate.

The Beginning of School Life

“Classes will begin tomorrow.”

It was the day before my school life would truly begin, several days after I had left my home and moved into the dorms. I had already gotten used to dorm life. Now that I had completed my preparations, there was nothing left to do—except to discuss how we would spend our time from here on out.

“And so I’m thinking I want you to practice some forms while I’m in class.”

While I wasn’t in class, Lynokis’s time was taken up by chores and other tasks related to my daily living. However, she would have some free time while I was at school, so I wanted her to use that time for training.

“Forms? Like what you do all the time?”

“Yes. But there isn’t much meaning to the forms themselves, so if there are any other kinds of training you’d rather do, or skills you want to practice, those are fine too.”

“What? I don’t need to do those specific forms?”

“Those are purely movements to train your body and chi, so you don’t really need to imitate it exactly. You could even just continuously practice straight punches.”

The forms I practiced were simply movements that vaguely remained in my

memory; they weren't movements I thought inherently made you stronger. I basically did them as exercise. They had no deeper meaning. So long as Lynokis was training her chi and her body, I had no complaints about how she chose to do it, though the forms were most definitely the easiest way since it allowed you to train your whole body equally.

"I see... Ah, by the way, Young Mistress, there is something I've been curious about."

"Yes?"

"This 'chi' is something that strengthens your body, yes?"

"Indeed."

"Then what are you like when you aren't using chi?"

So she was curious about that, was she? How wonderful. I could feel her interest in the martial arts growing.

"As you said, chi is a way to strengthen your physical capabilities. Going by physical body alone, you are much stronger than me. And yet, I am stronger than you, regardless."

"Really?"

"But of course. Even without chi, I still have martial knowledge that I have cultivated." At this, Lynokis gave me a cynical expression, but it was fine for her to have that perception for now. I continued, "I require chi to wield those martial arts to the fullest. The correct form, the transmission of power, the precise movements that allow not even a slight margin of error... Only by *combining* those with chi can you bring your abilities to their absolute limit with no excess and no strain. In other words, you can't become stronger with chi alone."

"Are you...really stronger than me even without chi?"

"Yes."

There was no denying that I lost in terms of raw physical strength. After all, I was in the body of a six-year-old. There was no way my current muscle mass was anywhere near sufficient. That was likely what made Lynokis so doubtful

that I was stronger without chi—but that didn't change that it was the truth. Even without chi, I was strong. I became a hundred times stronger if I did use it, but even if I didn't, I could easily win against Lynokis in her current state.

“Want to give it a try? You can use chi if you'd like.”

“S-Seriously...? Isn't this dangerous?”

“What's this now? Are you worried about me? Oh my. Then how about you do the same training regimen as me from now on? If you're strong enough to worry about me like this, you can clearly keep up, right?”

“I will certainly accept your match, please, and thank you!”

And that was how I taught my student a lesson.

“N-No way...” Lynokis muttered in shock, now face up on her back on the floor. I was looking down at her from above.

“Do you understand now? Martial arts take all manner of forms. There are ways to fight even without physical strength.”

Lynokis had released a swift punch cloaked in chi. I had predicted she would do exactly that, evaded the strike, kicked her foot out from under her, and spun her onto her back using her outstretched arm. It was a clean flip, if you asked me. It was a type of aiki...I think.

“Chi alone does not make you strong. If you don't polish your martial arts skills, it amounts to nothing.”

“You know...it looked to me like you already started to dodge before I had even moved.”

“I read your breathing. All I had to do was follow that. The path of the martial arts is much longer than you seem to think. So long that you cannot even see the end.”

Now then. Hopefully this would persuade Lynokis to put her all into her training. If she didn't, then she wouldn't gain anything from her efforts.



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Nia Liston: The Merciless Maiden Volume 2

by Umikaze Minamino

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