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Prologue

"Hey, did you guys see that paper play yesterday?!"

"I did! It was such an interesting show!"

"I didn't know the founding king of Altoire was so cool!"

"Didn't he look a lot like King Hyurence?"

"Oh yeah, and I thought the first queen's childhood name was Lunesia..."

For the entirety of my short walk from the dorms to the school, that was all I heard. Everyone I passed was talking about last night's program on the Silver Channel.

Neal and my instincts had been correct: that paper play project was a winner. It blew my dog-racing programs out of the water; all the broadcasting staff could think to tell me about them was that "people seem to like it." This paper play was a *far* more successful project.

This was what a real trendsetter looked like. I would even go so far as to say this was the first magivision program that had truly captured the hearts of the citizens of Altoire. It had its own unique imagery that let it completely stand out from the aimless string of programming aired every day. It was overflowing with a charm that made you want to watch more.

There was no doubt this was the case, since it had also captured my heart. It was seriously so good. I want to see the next episode already.

Even when I entered the classroom, the conversations about the paper play abounded. Everyone was obsessed with it. This was the power of magivision, the potential that magivision held. It had both influence and the ability to communicate ideas over a wide area.

We had not truly known the real power of magivision.

The students were already being influenced by it this much. This was a prime example of a place where magivision was readily available, a part of everyone's

accommodation. I had no doubt it was causing quite the buzz even outside the school as well; it might even be making waves back at the Liston territories by now. How would Bendelio try to counter this offensive? Or would he sit back and quietly observe for now? I still held a grudge against him for the summer schedule he'd subjected me to, but I did want him to succeed for the sake of the Liston Channel.

"Good morning, Nia," a voice higher pitched than usual called out as the speaker filled the seat next to me.

Reliared Silver had arrived.

Wow, look at how smug you are. You're not even trying to hide how much you want to boast, sticking your chest out like some successful entrepreneur. How wonderful. Given the surrounding reactions, she was almost certainly keenly aware of the response to the show.

The paper play had been a resounding success. That failure of mine over the summer caused me great frustration—I'd thought of it first! The Silvers had practically stolen it from me.

No, let's stop this. I'd had the idea at the worst place and the worst time. We just weren't fated to be together, that was all—at least, for now. Who knew how it would develop from here? I would let the Silvers bask in their victory (and their betrayal of me) for the moment. Those who followed after still had their own opportunities to surpass the original.

"Good morning, Relia. You're awfully smug today."

"Yup!" She enthusiastically nodded. "I've wanted to see your frustrated face for so long! You're frustrated, right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm oh so frustrated." Despite how lightly I said it, I was. I really was. If she were an adult, I'd have beat her up. She was practically mocking me and she knew it—I was sure she wouldn't mind if she had to face the consequences of her actions.

"People have been asking me about it all morning. 'What was that paper play?' 'What are you gonna do for future episodes?' Oh, how it pains me so! They can ask me questions all they want, but I can't answer them."

Glad she was willing to act so high and mighty about it all. My personal grievances aside, there was no denying this was going to be a big boon to the magivision industry as a whole. It was hard to think the ratings wouldn't increase overall. This wasn't a bad thing to have happened by any stretch of the imagination.

It also made me realize something else: I had really been lacking a sense of danger in my life. There was a facet of magivision I had taken far too lightly purely because I had been under the impression that I could clear most things up with a single fist if the situation called for it.

Before summer vacation, Hildetaura had been thinking hard about ideas for magivision. "I'd like some unique program for the capital as well," she'd said. At the time, I had viewed her words as quite irrelevant to me; there was no need for that. That unique program Hildetaura wanted to find was something that the Liston Channel also lacked.

Seeing the paper play project though, I had become all too aware that neither the capital's channel nor the Liston Channel had anything that could match it. That was what could be called a true success. My dog-racing program was like a baby next to this—there was that much of a difference in response.

This situation had only become further motivation for me to put on the national tournament; it was the only chance I had to compete against the other channels.

Magivision aside, there were other matters I still needed to consider. Much had happened around me over the summer.

First, there was the matter of raising a billion krams. It was the amount of money we needed in order to put on the national tournament. In order to fulfill this, my personal attendant, Lynokis, had made her adventuring debut. She had left the school grounds a few days ago and was no doubt taking down monsters and making money about now. Naturally, I didn't intend to leave this burden on Lynokis alone. I wanted to help out personally, and that meant I needed to make preparations for others to assist.

The second semester of my first year of elementary school had begun.

This fall seemed like it was going to be busy indeed.

Chapter 1: Her Highness's New Project

A few days had passed since the new school semester had begun.

"Young Mistress! I'm home! I'm back!"

I can see that.

"Welcome back. I'll talk to you after— What?"

I had gone to move past Lynokis as I left the room, but before I could go farther, she suddenly grabbed my arm.

"Where's my welcome-back hug?! Your humble Lynokis has returned!"

Why did she look so desperate?

"Yes. And I have to go to school." I wasn't in danger of being late, but I didn't have the leeway to sit and have a leisurely chat either. We had a lot to catch up on, so if we started talking now, we'd never stop.

"Who cares about school? Are you saying it's more important than me?!" Lynokis whined.

"Right now, yes."

"How horrible! Even though I went out to earn money for you, even though I went all that way for you and your mean self! I tried my hardest for you!"

"Okay, I'll see you later." Seeing Lynokis suddenly burst into tears, I decided to leave her alone for now. She'd calm down if I gave her time.

"You're horrible! You're really abandoning me!" She screamed so loud I could hear her from the other side of the door, but I ignored her and continued walking.

Lynokis had arrived home around the day she had been scheduled to. What hadn't been part of the plan was that she would come back to the dorms first thing in the morning. We obviously wouldn't have time to chat now, so I wasn't sure why she hadn't taken her time and made her way back in the afternoon.

Her adventurer debut, the details of her trip, the results of her hunt—I was naturally interested in all the stories Lynokis had to tell. Given how she looked, I imagined she hadn't done bad at least.

Still...it might not be until evening that we could really talk. Hildetaura would likely come around today as well, after all.

"Nia, you know why I am here, yes?"

After school, I returned to my dorm room, my brain exhausted from overuse, and already waiting there was Hildetaura sipping away at some tea, just as I'd thought she would be. This smells like expensive tea leaves I don't even normally get to drink... She was our guest though, so it made sense.

Apparently, she had originally been waiting down in the lobby for me, but Lynokis had happened to walk past with the laundry and had let her through. Hildetaura was known for her approachability, but she was still royalty, so Lynokis's judgment hadn't been incorrect—neither was the choice to make use of the expensive tea leaves.

We hadn't made any plans, but she'd come to see me again today, after all.

"Let me guess, you want to continue yesterday's conversation?"

"Yes. We have yet to actually decide on something after all."

Not wrong.

"Young Mistress, did something happen between you and Her Highness?" Lynokis asked in a whisper when she came to take my bag. She'd only just returned this morning, so it was natural she wasn't aware of the state of things.

"I had a chat with Hilde about possible ideas for a new program. The Silvers have jumped ahead with their paper plays, so we need to devise a counterattack. You've at least heard the rumors by now, right?" I answered, without lowering my voice. I didn't mind if Hildetaura heard so I saw no reason to hide from her.

Lynokis had been absent for a while, but she had likely heard something from the attendant network. That paper play was the talk of the town right now—

people were discussing it everywhere you went.

She nodded. "Something about it being a winning proposal, yes."

That phrase perfectly described the situation. The Silvers had struck gold. Frustrated by that, Hildetaura had come to discuss possible counterattacks with me over the past several days, and yesterday, we had gone out to the town to try and see if we could find something to use for a program. Though to no one's surprise, that wasn't such an easy task, and we had ended up aimlessly wandering around window shopping, trying on clothes, checking out the stalls, eating some sweet desserts, and then returning home.

To be honest, the only impression I had of our excursion was that going out together was kind of fun. I'd gone around with Hildetaura feeling like a grandma watching over her granddaughter as she greatly enjoyed herself. That was it.

"You want to go back out again?" I sat myself down across from her as I asked, even though I'd be standing right back up again if the answer was yes.

"Of course."

Really? I also wanted to think up a good proposal, so it wasn't that I didn't want to search for ideas, but...

"But let us not go by ourselves," Hildetaura quickly added. "We ended up doing nothing but playing around yesterday. When I returned to the castle and reflected on our day, I was appalled to realize how little we had actually achieved."

I couldn't blame her because I felt exactly the same way. For the record, Lynette *had* joined us yesterday.

"That said, I do think we are on the right track to approach this with the mindset of finding a project rather than thinking of one," Hildetaura continued. "Everyone at the broadcasting station is already working hard to brainstorm new ideas, after all."

Changing one's perspective was important when stuck. "We're better off trying to look at things in the long term. Nothing good will come from panicking," I replied. If it only took one or two days of wandering around town to find a good project, no one would struggle to find ideas.

"How can I not panic, though? Only Altoire does not have a signature program."

"Wait, what's the Liston Channel's signature program then?"

Did she mean Bendelio's *Tales of a Liston Stroll*? It *had* somehow ended up the longest-running program on the Liston Channel. Its target audience was on the older side, but I supposed you could consider that a winning program. I could certainly enjoy watching it on occasion—except for the alcohol tasting portions.

"The dog races!"

"What?" I was surprised by Hildetaura suddenly raising her voice but also by the answer itself.

"That dog program is absolutely a winning proposal! You recorded so many over the summer in both your territories and the Silver territories, didn't you?! And in the capital, as well! That's because it's popular!"

Really? It didn't feel that way to me. The only thoughts I'd had during all those recordings were "Wow, they're recording a lot of these" and "Is it really smart to record this many?"

"Do you think it's a winner?" I decided to ask the silent third party.

Lynokis nodded earnestly. "But of course. Dogs are man's best friend no matter where in the world you go, and they are practically the star of the program. The contents are simple enough for anyone to understand, which makes it accessible to a wide audience. There are many dog lovers out there. I personally couldn't care less about the dogs, but you yourself are also cute, Young Mistress. I cannot find a possible reason for it to be a flop."

I had no reason to think otherwise if Lynokis was indeed correct, but...

Honestly, now that I had borne witness to a true winning proposal, it really felt like night and day. My little dog races were clearly far inferior to the paper plays.

Hildetaura took a sip of her tea. "The Silvers are no doubt going to record paper plays of classical literature and folk tales. In fact, I am sure they will go even beyond that. Art could be used to present anything."

I agreed that the possibilities of the paper plays were vast, but what was truly surprising was how well Vikson Silver had hit the ground running. If the debut program had been fumbled, it would likely have taken longer for society to care about these paper plays.

That said, they had literally chosen to recount the founding of the kingdom. It was an easy topic for viewers to care about if they were even just a little patriotic. They had really aimed at a good place. I doubted there was a better first play than this.

"The Liston territories undoubtedly have their dog program. It is something that is even more difficult to follow up on than the paper plays, since it is entirely dependent on your unique abilities and speed, Nia. What is important is that this is not restricted to dogs but can also be applied to all kinds of creatures. Could competition between people not get viewers just as excited? On top of that, because you constantly win, your audience gets curious about how long your streak will continue. I have even heard there are dog lovers who are training their dogs solely to try and beat you."

True, there were dog owners who would really talk up their beloved pets.

There was a time I'd raced with an aristocrat's dog, and its owner had said to me all smug, "Do you really think someone like you can win against *our* doggy?"

It really was a much higher-rated program than I'd anticipated. I hadn't even intended for things to turn out this way. Originally, all that had happened was that I'd been playing with the sheepdog at a farm I'd gone to record at. I'd just happened to fetch the ball faster than the dog could.

"You remember we raced with a dog during the summer, yes?" Hildetaura asked.

"Yes, I do." Her challenge hadn't been unwarranted. For an eight-year-old, Hildetaura had been pretty fast.

"I had been thinking that if I won, I would be able to take the dog project from you."

Really now.

"Why not do as you please? You can just copy what we do." I had no qualms

about acknowledging one's bold ambition or desire to overthrow the powerful —especially if they intended to overthrow me through their own ability rather than simple negotiation.

"Like I said before, you are the reason that program can exist. If I had only lost to you, then I could still have made something out of it. But it is no good if I lose to the dog as well. In that case, the program would be based around the high win rate of the dogs."

In other words, she had determined that it would be impossible at her current strength.

"Hm... Thinking about it like that, nothing really comes to mind at all." I understood now why Hildetaura was struggling as much as she was. In her case, her royal standing meant there were proposals that wouldn't fly due to the quality and class expected of her. There were some projects where simply giving it a try wouldn't be permitted.

I was busy with raising one billion krams, but it didn't mean I could slack on my activities for Project Magivision, even if said krams were technically all for promoting magivision in the first place. Abandoning Hildetaura here would be like turning my back on that overarching goal, so I wanted to help her out as much as possible.

A signature program for the Altoire Broadcasting Station...

Well, for now, there was one thing we could very easily do.

"Let's start by increasing the number of brains we have working the problem."

"The number of...brains?"

The more brains we had, the more ideas would be conjured up. Preferably, that brain would belong to someone who had some experience with magivision but whom we trusted not to leak anything. Someone who hadn't been too involved in the industry so their imagination could be allowed to run a little freer than those of us who were aware of the restrictions in place.

In other words, we needed my brother—my dear older brother who was surprisingly a great help in times of need—Neal Liston.

"Lynokis, go to the boys' dorm and capture my brother. Bring Lynette along as well."

"Yes, Young Mistress."

Neal was usually busy with swordsmanship training after school, but he'd always make sure to stop by his dorm room to drop off his school bag and grab his training clothes first. If we hurried, we still had a chance to catch him.

"I see."

Lynokis had succeeded in catching Neal just as he was about to head off to the dojo and returned with both him and Lynette in tow.

"I'm not sure how much help I'll be, but I'll at least try and think of something with you."

Ever the little gentleman, my brother was. When we briefly explained our situation, he readily agreed to assist. It appeared he was willing to forgo his training for the day to accompany us.

"I'm sorry for calling you over so suddenly, brother. You had plans, didn't you?"

"Don't worry about it," my brother said as he brought his tea to his lips. He was a relative, but since I'd called him over on such short notice, I'd made sure to serve him the expensive tea leaves. "Even if you hadn't called me here, I was beginning to think that I need to start being more involved in magivision. I am the eldest son of the Listons, after all. Honestly, I feel bad constantly leaving it to you. Please ask me for help any time."

You know... Neal really was a precious little boy. He was growing so fast I almost wanted to tell him there was no rush to become an adult.

Hildetaura and Reliared were becoming adults just as fast, really. Personally, I thought they were far too mature for children of their age. Perhaps this was a sign that children who were part of royalty or aristocracy were not permitted to remain children for long. Even though the commoner children around them were allowed to aimlessly run around full of life every day, letting off the strangest cries as they found some arbitrary enjoyment in whatever they were

doing, it wasn't deemed fitting of their higher-class status. If you asked me, being carefree was how children should be, but... No, I supposed to each their own.

"I apologize, Neal. This is really something I should be dealing with myself," Hildetaura said.

"Pay it no mind. The promotion of magivision is relevant to me as well. By the way, is Lady Reliared not present today?" Having the image in his mind that we always worked as a trio, Neal couldn't help but question Reliared's absence. Right now, the only ones at the table were Hildetaura, Neal, and me. Lynokis and Lynette were stationed behind us.

"Relia's busy these days," I answered. Despite appearances, it wasn't because of her newfound pride that she'd abandoned us—however much truth was in that. "It appears she's doing research within the school, even among the middle and high school students, finding out what plays, books, folk tales, legends, and even picture books are popular. She's devoted to the hunt for potential topics for the paper plays."

The three of us were comrades, but we were also rivals. We would assist each other when deemed necessary, but when not, we would prioritize ourselves. Hildetaura's current dilemma was not quite at the stage where direct help was required—it was like a stage before that. Therefore, Reliared was focusing entirely on her own duty. Once we had arrived at a project idea that Hildetaura wished to work on, Reliared would no doubt assist as well.

In fact, Reliared's work was also connected to Project Magivision. There was no reason for us to interfere. If anything, it only gave us the motivation to not lose to her. That was why Hildetaura found herself here now.

"In that case, I'll try to come up with various ideas."

We're counting on you, brother.

"We have decided we are going out, yes?" Hildetaura confirmed. "We had best not waste time, so let us talk on our way." Hildetaura lived in the castle, so her curfew wasn't so strict, but Neal and I had the dorm curfew to worry about, so we decided we'd best set off right away.

We ended up entering a café to take a little break and look over our spoils.

"Well, um, we...certainly did end up having fun instead," Neal remarked.

We certainly had.

After riding in Hildetaura's carriage to town, we'd ended up wandering around the main street, going wherever we so desired.

We had gone shopping at the general store, visited the bookstore and browsed what was popular, looked at clothes and little accessories, perused a magic shop... Hildetaura had mainly been the one joyfully wandering around, my brother simply tagging along and I the grandma making sure my grandchildren were staying safe.

Honestly, I was content knowing that Hildetaura was having fun; she spent so much of her time at recordings or carrying out her royal duties that I thought it was fine for her to get to play around sometimes. Play was part of a child's work too, after all.

"We certainly did buy a lot of things," Hildetaura said.

Hildetaura and Neal had certainly bought a lot of things, yes. They both tended to be busy most of the time, so being given the chance to go shopping like this, it appeared they couldn't help but make a number of impulse purchases when something caught their eye. Lynokis and Lynette had helped carry their bags. Incidentally, the two of them were currently having tea at a different table.

"What is that, Neal?"

"It's a pen. I thought I'd get it for my father's birthday."

Neither Lynokis nor I had been aware but it turned out that Ornitt Liston's birthday was coming up. I usually wouldn't buy anything on these trips, but I'd taken the opportunity to buy something for him with my brother so we could gift it to him together. As for my mother, Allieu Liston's birthday was apparently towards the end of winter.

"Oh, for your father's birthday," the princess said with a smile on her face.

"Have you ever given anything to His Majesty for his birthday, Hilde?" I asked.

Usually, her father was a forbidden topic, but it felt unnatural to *not* bring him up in this situation, so I decided to give it a shot. I had expected her to brush me off with a cold, negative response and an icy expression, but instead...

What was returned was silence, but something much worse than ice. There was a severe hatred in that frown of hers. It was a dark expression unusual for a girl always so friendly and full of life.

"Just once. He immediately rejected it. I have not tried giving him any more presents since."

A response even colder than I could have imagined came back. I won't deny that that *did* sound like something the king would do. I was starting to feel like I'd be better off not hearing Hildetaura's stories concerning her father. It'd be best not to bring up the king in such a casual manner. Even Neal looked disgusted.

"Thank you for waiting. Here are your tea and donuts."

The atmosphere had gotten quite awkward after that exchange, but the waiter arrived with our order at the perfect time.

"Ah, this here! These 'donuts' are what I have heard is popular among the common people as of late!" Hildetaura exclaimed.

These pieces of ringlike bread where what had excited her? The white powder sprinkled on top like snow looked like sugar. It seemed like it would be awfully sweet.

"Um... Are there no knives or forks?" my brother asked, looking a little lost. We had only been served the saucers with our tea and the plate of donuts and nothing else.

Lynette swiftly moved next to Neal and whispered in his ear: "You eat them with your hands, Young Master." The moment she had informed him, she swiftly returned to her own table. *Good work, Lynette.*

"Ah, I see."

"So this is what they taste like," Hildetaura muttered after a bite.

"They're very oily, aren't they?" They were basically fried bread and quite

heavy on the stomach. Had my body been as old as I was mentally, I'd no doubt be suffering from a stomachache after just one.

"They taste delicious," Hildetaura remarked.

"I agree. What do you think, Nia?" Neal turned to ask me.



"It's nice, but I might prefer something a little fluffier." *These children...* Both the children and our attendants seemed to like the donuts, but I found myself preferring lighter fare. I didn't dislike sweets, but this was a little too sweet for me.

And, well, that meant another day concluded with my only takeaway from it all being "That was a nice little wander around the town."

"Nia, I'd like to get your thoughts on this before I bring it up to Her Highness."

It turned out my brother had had a breakthrough at some point. See? The boy was of surprisingly great help when you needed him. He so perfectly managed the role of the savior.

On our way home after parting ways with Hildetaura, Neal told me his proposal. That idea of his would soon become the capital's signature program, *Cooking Princess*. And it would be the cause of a huge incident that would lead to me effectively being told to leave the country...

But we aren't quite there in the story yet.

The day after our little excursion, I was the one to call Hildetaura to my room this time, and the three of us gathered once more to talk about the plan that my brother had concocted. Oh, we also invited Reliared, because when she heard that we had gone out on the town together, she'd been so frustrated she'd ended up crying. What an honest girl she was.

I'd already heard Neal's suggestion in advance and it was honestly quite a bold move. Despite how endearing he was, he might turn out to be quite the schemer in the future.

"Your Highness will have two main hurdles to clear: first, getting permission for the project; second is related to the content of the project itself. At the moment, you are a member of royalty who appears publicly enough that you are a household name. That alone means you are faced with political judgments and circumstances whenever considering this type of project. This isn't something we can avoid. As such, if you do anything deemed too 'common,' it

will have an effect on not just royalty but aristocrats as well. It may result in them being looked down upon... Not that we're in a generation that particularly cares about that sort of thing. Regardless, that is why the projects you can participate in are limited. So I tried thinking in the reverse instead. How can you get permission for a project and persuade others that it is something that you must do?"

"Well, what is the answer?" Hildetaura was already completely engaged with my brother's explanation. Her gaze was frighteningly intense. She might have been a child, but she was undoubtedly still a member of royalty; the look in her eyes was exerting the pressure of a ruler.

"From what I understand, Your Highness is unable to freely participate in new projects without a very justified reason. I don't believe you can get this type of signature program approved through ordinary means. Without some political justification, I doubt they'd even pay it any mind. In that case, what can you do? Well, simple: record it without permission first."

"What? Without permission? But if I do that..."

"Then the recording will either be filed away never to be used, or it will be completely destroyed. But those are the same outcomes you'd see at the proposal stage too, no? Instead of being unable to record because you couldn't get the proposal accepted, why not record first and then present the proposal while showing off what it could be? If upper management is able to find some arbitrary political gain from what you put together, then you'll be able to get it approved. At the very least, I do think the recorded episode would be permitted to be broadcast."

Recording anything took equipment, human resources, and a readied location, and all of that cost money. It wasn't something that could be done for free. Using recorded footage as the proposal document meant that there was the possibility that all of the funds used for that recording could go to absolute waste. Betting on upper management seeing the possible gains to be had also meant being reliant on others for the plan's success.

However, Hildetaura wasn't in a position where she could get a proposal approved through ordinary means. Anything that I could very easily tackle with

Occupation Observation would be rejected right out the gate for her. Before now, that likely hadn't proved a big issue for her since there wasn't exactly much in the way of competition.

With Reliared and me now on the scene though, we were slowly building a competitive base between our channels. My dog-racing program and the Silvers' paper plays were winning proposals in that respect. If the capital's broadcasting station didn't do something soon, they would be left in the dust. I had felt Hildetaura's panic from the moment she'd come to consult with us.

"I don't really like the thought of doing it before asking either," Neal replied, but I think in Your Highness's case, you have to go for such an unorthodox method or nothing will move forward."

"True... Then let us continue thinking in this direction. What about the project itself? Did you have any ideas for that?"

It was a valid question. So far, all we'd discussed was how to get the proposal itself approved.

"Of course I do. Though whether or not it's to Your Highness's tastes may be a different question."

"I do not mind. Suggest anything you wish."

Next, we had to address the contents of the project. This would usually be the most pressing matter in the Liston and Silver territories, where proposals could pass much more smoothly.

"The programs that Your Highness appears on tend to be ones that involve improving the image of the royal family; they involve you interacting with your people directly or contributing to them in some way. You have a lot of publicized royal duties, as well. That is why we should avoid anything too vulgar—that would be the primary reason that your proposal would be rejected."

Right. I wasn't allowed to watch many of her programs, but that did seem to be the case from what I'd heard. Whenever Reliared or I featured in recordings with Hildetaura, it tended to be framed as if Hildetaura were coming along with *us*, even if in reality, many of the requests came directly from the princess herself.

"Keeping all of that in mind, how does cooking sound?"

"Cooking?"

"Yes. Remember we went to eat those donuts yesterday?"

Hildetaura and I quietly listened to Neal speak as Reliared, captivated by my brother, quietly stewed upon hearing that be mentioned. See what you missed because you didn't come to our meetings? Of course, we can't expect the busy daughter of the successful Silver territories to put aside her time for something so trivial! What a shame! What a shame indeed!

"You seemed to have done your research, so I assumed you may have an interest in food."

"Well, more than an interest, um..." Hildetaura seemed hesitant. In other words, she wouldn't say she had *no* interest, but not so much that she would consider it a hobby or anything.

"Oh, excuse me for misunderstanding then. But I don't think cooking is a bad place to start. Your recording location would pretty much always be a kitchen, and there are certainly plenty of those around the capital. If you made something new every time, then it wouldn't get boring. You can even take it further by not just cooking the food but inviting guests to try what you make, as well; there's all sorts of variations you can make. If you used that as a way to show aristocratic circles that Your Highness can even cook, that would be directly tied to improving the image of the royal family."

Hildetaura gasped in realization. "Y-You are right... Making food, calling guests to try out that food, and maybe even cooking with the guests may not be a bad idea..."

Hey, that's what I did at the Chocolate Lily's Aroma. I'd hosted that episode with Sharro White before she became the poster girl of the Ice Rose Theater Company. We'd ended up making some pasta with a chef who really wanted a girlfriend. That was the episode that had prompted us to start bringing on more guests.

Hildetaura muttered away to herself as she got lost in her thoughts. "Improve the lives of the common people... Help advertise restaurants... A proposal that

would let us invite various guests... Could arrange something with foreign emissaries... Would help improve our political image... Depending on how we do it, we could find out what dirty secrets that horrid Jaurès is hiding..."

It seemed she had latched on to the idea as if there were nothing else that could possibly beat it. There were some ominous mutterings that sounded like they were completely unrelated to cooking, but I pretended not to hear them.

"Neal Liston!" she suddenly exclaimed, slamming her hands on the table as she stood herself up. "I thank you for your input! You will receive a reward upon the advent of our success!"

"Oh, um, sure. Good...luck...?"

Before Neal could finish speaking, Hildetaura burst out of my room. I'm having déjà vu right now.

I silently glanced at Lynokis behind me. My meaning having gotten across without further elaboration, she swiftly left the room to see Hildetaura off. This was also what had happened last time.

"Well, uh, I'm glad she liked it," Neal said, snapping out of his daze at the sudden escape and reaching out for his tea.

"Good job," I told him. When he'd told me the plan yesterday, his thoughts had been far more disorganized, but it appeared he'd managed to get them together overnight.

"I should be the one saying that to you. You're pretty much always using your mind and body like this, right? I feel bad that I'm basically forcing my work onto you."

I appreciated that he was trying to be considerate, but I wasn't really using my head that much. The ones using their brains were the staff at the broadcasting station.

"Don't worry about it. It's not really the kind of thing the future lord of our household should be doing, anyway." If Hildetaura had things she wasn't allowed to do because of her political standing, then the same should be the case for Neal. Since I wasn't the successor, it was far easier for me to move around. "I do think it would be nice for you to appear on magivision from time

to time though..."

"I'll...think about it."

And that was how things got moving on Hildetaura's new show, *Cooking Princess*. Apparently a lot would happen behind the scenes before the project really started to take off; there would be some mutterings related to how she already seemed very used to cooking from episode one. As much as those rumors would be floating around though, Hildetaura herself wouldn't elaborate.

Regardless, the trend of the ratings would only go upwards, and the program's popularity would only continue to increase the more episodes that aired.

"H-Hey, Young Master Neal! Let's go out again today!"

"Apologies, but I want to make sure I go to the dojo today since I skipped training yesterday. Let's go a different day."

"O-Okay..."

Now that Reliared had been so blatantly rejected, it was time for me to get to my loathsome homework.

Chapter 2: Contribution

Some time had passed since the new semester had begun. My everyday life was not so different from the first semester, but...I would definitely say the paper play program from the Silver territories was a notable change.

Unsurprisingly, that program was spreading through the school like wildfire.

Their first special, A Founding History of Altoire, had finished, and now they were entering their second. Their choice of topics was as excellent as I expected, allowing the program to smoothly enter the magivision scene. They were now airing a serialized paper play called *The Red Knight Chronicles:* Founding the Kingdom. They would gradually progress the story each day, turning it into a long-form broadcast.

It was the story of a renowned hero, the Red Knight Soma, who assisted with the founding of the Kingdom of Altoire. The path he had walked through history was depicted in a dramatic and respectful yet thrilling fashion. Already a household name, the story of the Red Knight was even more well-known than the stories of the founding of the country, and it was immediately loved by the citizens. It was aired eight times a day, so you could watch it at almost any time.

Incidentally, I was also watching it. I had known of the Red Knight's name, but I had no idea what kind of man he was or what life he led, so it was quite the interesting watch. But the way they spread out the story over multiple days left me feeling impatient for each continuation. However, it surprisingly wasn't so bad having something to look forward to the next day.

Meanwhile, at the Altoire Broadcasting Station, Hildetaura's program had still not become the signature program she wished it to be, though the signs of it one day reaching that point were there. *Cooking Princess*—the recently aired cooking program she starred in—had already begun spreading through the city. If they kept the pace of the episodes up, it would no doubt grow to great acclaim.

Just the other day, dinner at the dorm had been the meal that Hildetaura had

made on her program, and there was an unusually large buzz surrounding the whole affair, so at the very least, it appeared her program was taken favorably within the school. Since she only really needed a kitchen to record in, she could easily record in the capital. Recently, she would go straight to a recording after school.

The broadcasting station was going to use *Cooking Princess's* own ratings to promote it. Hildetaura was also charging ahead with the intention of building the program into something great.

She must have practiced a lot in advance. It was quite funny seeing how used to chopping and preparing ingredients she was at the program's premier. Though she had apparently only started cooking about a month ago, she was already able to chop ingredients without looking as she chatted with the chef. She was so skilled that she didn't even seem like a beginner. No doubt it was partly because she was a very fast learner.

Cooking Princess was still in its early days, but I could already see its potential success. So long as no great disasters happened, it would almost definitely grow into being the capital's signature program.

Now, I was walking through town with Lynokis after leaving the school. Recordings for the Liston Channel were going smoothly. In fact, thanks to that horrendous schedule over the summer, things were quite relaxed now. The channel was still making its way through the backlog we'd managed to record, so I had more free time than usual. It was quite convenient for me, honestly.

There was a time I had seriously considered taking Bendelio's life for daring to craft such an impossible schedule, but given the free time I now had because of that, I was willing to forgive him just a little. Knowing that both the Silvers and the capital had come up with a signature program, a part of me was feeling a little uneasy, but my panic wouldn't change anything, so I decided to put aside those worries for now.

Right now, I needed to focus on what I could do.

Things were already secretly in motion. I had been training Gandolph and Lynette since the end of summer vacation, and they were already at a level where they needed some practical experience. Despite the short time we had

been working together, they had already started getting a hang of controlling their chi, likely because they already had a foundation in martial arts. I had miscalculated how long it would take them, and I was happy about that.

Gandolph's growth was especially notable. Lynokis and Lynette had their duties as personal attendants, so they couldn't dedicate all their time to training, but given his profession as an instructor, Gandolph had a lot of time to spend on martial arts. Thanks to that, I was already able to teach him things that would bring him well beyond being our pack mule. This was also a miscalculation I was pleased with.

I would love for him to raise money and contribute to the cause. About a billion krams would suffice. Those were the thoughts running through my head as we entered a familiar back alley; we were headed for the rats' bar.

"Yo. Been a hot minute since you've been here, eh?"

The Shifty Shadow Rat was once more filled with thugs and drunks, despite the sun still being high in the sky.

"Hello, Anzel," I greeted him, as we sat down at the bar counter. The moment he saw us enter, Anzel served up some juice for me. "Thank you for accommodating Leeno." Leeno was the fake identity that Lynokis assumed while working as an adventurer. Apparently Lyno had been her nickname when she attended the academy, so we made sure to avoid that. Though admittedly, Leeno wasn't that much of a deviation.

"Not like I've done a whole lot. All I'm doing is letting you borrow the space."

I already knew without asking that that wasn't all he had done. Lynokis had already gone out on several adventures since her debut, enough that she was beginning to draw the curious attention of other members of the adventurer's guild. There were no doubt all kinds of strange people trying to get involved with her, from those trying to scout her for their parties, to those trying to feed off of her scraps, to those trying to dig into her background to figure out who she really was.

All of those in pursuit of her would ultimately come to a dead end at her established base of operations, the Shifty Shadow Rat. That was why Leeno the adventurer could still work as Lynokis the personal attendant—no one knew

they were one and the same. It was only thanks to Anzel and Fressa's assistance that our plan became possible. There had no doubt already been chaos caused by people digging into Lynokis's business.

"Anyway, why'd you come by? Gotta be a reason, right?"

"For Lily to come herself, it must be quite the reason," Fressa added, slipping into the conversation as she sat on the other side of me, opposite to Lynokis. To clarify, Lily was the name I went by while at this bar.

"I'm glad you're both so quick on the uptake." As calm as we looked, we'd come here right after school, and that meant it was almost time for curfew—we didn't have much time. It didn't help that the Shadow Rat was pretty far from the campus.

"Anzel. Fressa." Now that I had free time, I was able to start making my own moves. That was why I had come to the Shifty Shadow Rat to make my request clear. "Would you be willing to make a contribution? One that's about a billion krams would be perfect."

The two froze. And then moved in unison, taken aback.

"You know, anything you say is freakin' scary, even if it's a joke. Like, seriously scary. And you're not even joking, you're being totally serious right now, ain'tcha?"

"Ah ha ha, of course she isn't! You're so funny, Lily. Stop with such tasteless jokes already... Actually, you don't look like you're joking..."

Apparently my candor had inadvertently scared them.

Anzel looked very upset, and Fressa had a smile devoid of life, her eyes dull.

"I'm sorry, I jumped the gun a bit there. Let me explain from the beginning."

"Do you really think that's the only problem here? You can explain all you want; that ain't changing my answer," Anzel said.

"One billion is impossible... I couldn't earn that much even if there were a hundred of me..."

"Please just hear me out first."

Confusion was, of course, the natural response to suddenly being asked to raise one billion krams. Both of them were also aware of my strength, so they were likely worried about what would happen to them should they refuse. They must have been taking my words as a threat disguised as a simple suggestion.

Naturally, I had no intention of threatening them; if they refused, that was that. When it came to such a large sum of money, if the people I was asking for assistance didn't willingly cooperate, it likely wouldn't go well.

Why would I even threaten them? If I was going to go out of my way to threaten anyone, I may as well make it someone that seems likely to have that much money in their possession. I'm not here to waste my time.

"I told you that Leeno is trying to earn a billion krams, right? I'd like you to assist her with that. You can view this as a deal. You pay tribute to me, and I will supply you something of equal value."

"Equal value?" They seemed to have been convinced I wasn't actually threatening them, because the dull offer had both of their interests piqued.

"I'll train each of you to become a hundred times stronger than you are now. What do you think?"

Anzel and Fressa's expressions both changed. Fressa was silent, while Anzel could only let out an "Are you serious?" They were both incredibly straightfaced, their eyes frighteningly intense as they stared me down. Of course residents of the underworld would be hungry for such a suggestion. They knew right away that my training was worth even more than a billion krams.

"I'm serious. I'm pretty sure Leeno has gotten fifty times stronger already since she started training. Right?" I turned to Lynokis.

Lynokis tilted her head. "I'm not sure if I could quantify it as such, but I'm sure that my past self wouldn't have even a one percent chance of winning against me as I am now."

That assessment also worked. The numbers I was throwing out were just to make a point anyway.

"Now hang on. You're a martial artist, and so's Lynokis, ain't she? I don't fight with my hands. Can you still train me?"

"Of course."

Anzel was able to summon a metal pipe that was his attuned weapon. Of course I remembered that.

Fressa leaned closer to me. "Don't tell anyone this, okay? Though I'm pretty sure you already realized by now, Lily," she whispered. "I'm actually an assassin. Do you still think you can make me stronger?"

"Of course."

The main effect of learning how to utilize chi was that you could raise your body's basic parameters. It was likely to be useful to anyone, regardless of their profession. *How* useful would depend on how they chose to work with it afterwards.

"Here, how about I teach you a little for free so that you can get more of an idea? Lynokis, watch after the bar, please."

"Yes, Young Mistress."

After Fressa, Anzel, and I all moved to Anzel's room in the back, I taught them a little about chi. With the curfew fast approaching, I decided the quickest and easiest way to explain was to let them experience it for themselves. Both of them were trained in martial arts—or at least, violence—to some degree. Practical experience meant much more to them than words.

"All right, kiddo, I see what you're gettin' at now."

"I'm not quite sure I understand what just happened... Well, no, I do, I suppose."

I'd taken both their hands and controlled the chi within their bodies. Them having just some sense of what had happened was more than enough. The reason your average joe couldn't learn how to manipulate chi was because it was an energy difficult for them to even sense in the first place. If you could at least somewhat sense it, that was already a sign that you were trained enough to start learning to master it.

"I've felt this before."

"Right?"

Both of them already had experience with chi?

"I think the really crazy guys at the top of the underworld use this. You know what I'm talking about, right, Anzel? Like the executives of the main Qilong house."

"Yeah, that was exactly what I was thinking. Those guys are definitely as strong as Lily."

Wow, there are still people in the modern day who know how to use chi? I'd love to spar with them one day. Though the two hadn't known chi by name, they knew of skilled practitioners of some mysterious power, at the very least. Until I'd informed them of what I was making use of, I probably came under the same category as those dangerous fighters.

"So you're saying that we can use that too?" Anzel asked.

"Indeed."

"To confirm, we just need to *help* you raise a billion krams, right? Not that we absolutely have to raise one billion krams ourselves? Just helping?" Fressa intensely asked. To be fair, asking someone to pay you one billion krams and asking someone to help raise one billion krams *were* two very different things, so of course she'd want to make absolutely sure.

"I'm not telling you to force yourself to raise this money or anything. Simply go at your own pace. In fact, you'll probably just be helping Leeno with her tasks. So long as you'll help make a contribution in some manner, then you can go about it as you please."

Looking at their faces now, I didn't even have to ask for their answer.

And so, the plan to raise enough money to hold my national martial arts tournament went into full swing in early fall.

"And so, I'll be the one to teach you how to use chi."

The day after Nia made the deal with Anzel and Fressa, Lynokis came to the bar as Leeno while the sky was still dark.

"All right, we're counting on you."

Lynokis, Anzel, and Fressa stood in a dimly lit room. Anzel had chosen the basement of the bar as their training ground. It was a little stuffy, but it was a decent-sized room. Apparently, it used to serve as a brewery. Barrels and kegs filled with alcohol were shoved to the side to make room for their training. Word had it that the previous owners used to make moonshine, so they'd made the space pretty large to accommodate that.

When Anzel first bought the place, the cellar had been filled with all manner of strange machinery gathering dust, but he'd had it all removed before he opened up shop. As the new master of the bar, he had no intention of making his own alcohol, at least, not for now.

"Could Lily not make it, after all?" Fressa asked.

"She has school."

Lynokis could guess what Fressa was really asking with that question: "Are you really trained enough in chi to teach someone?"

"The young mistress said that even I could manage teaching you for now, since we won't be starting from scratch. For now, all you'll be taught is what you need to practice in order to create that opportunity for your body to be able to manipulate chi."

"'Create the opportunity'?"

"Yes. Everyone's instinctual understanding of chi is different, so it's difficult to teach with words. In fact, it's not even something you can teach if your student can't sense chi." Lynokis held out both hands as she spoke. "The young mistress has already taught you this, yes?"

The two felt that they had the ability to sense chi. At that time, Nia had controlled something within them. They'd struggle to explain anything in detail, but Anzel and Fressa had both certainly been able to sense chi. Since they could sense it, they could be taught.

"The idea is that I'll repeat what Nia showed you until you can begin to start controlling it yourself. Being able to manipulate it even the slightest bit is enough to then move on to independent training." That was how Lynokis had

acquired the skills herself—it was nostalgic to look back on.

"How long'd it take you to be able to start controlling it?" Anzel asked.

"About a week." However, Lynokis was with Nia twenty-four seven, so they were able to train regardless of time and place. It had taken her about a week, but the structure of that week was far different from the time Anzel and Fressa would have available. Lynokis would be going back out on another adventure soon, and the two of them had their own work in the Shadow Rat—it was impossible for her to be with them at all times the way Nia had been for her.

"A week, huh...?" Now that they knew, that length now served as their guide for the length of time they felt it should take them.

"You're about to go off adventuring again, aren't you?" Fressa asked, with a thoughtful expression.

"In a bit, yes."

"Hmm, maybe I'll go with you then. I *did* promise Lily that I'd help you raise the money, after all. So, Anzel, I'll be taking a bit of leave from work, 'kay?"

It seemed Fressa intended to come along with her so that she could train more consistently. Lynokis had no reason to refuse; Fressa had just better be prepared to get worked to the bone.

"Hey, you tryna get a leg up on me?" Anzel asked, eyes narrowing in accusation.

"Being flexible and carefree is a freelancer's greatest strength!"

This was the difference between someone who was casually employed versus the one running the establishment—the amount of free time they could take was entirely different. Despite that, Lynokis didn't find herself all that jealous.

"Fine, fine. But you better teach me when you get back."

"Learn from me and it'll cost you money, you know? Obviously."

"God, you're so stingy, you know that?"

"You don't seriously think you'd do anything different if our roles were reversed, do you?"

"All right, let's get this training started," Anzel said, quickly changing the subject.

It seemed Fressa had assumed correctly.

After kicking things off, a week passed and the two were able to acquire their springboard to begin controlling chi, just as Nia had predicted. Nia had most likely foreseen that the two would pick it up quickly, which was why she had determined that Lynokis would be able to get them started perfectly fine.

Her understanding and eye for martial artists was undeniable.

Summer had already faded, and fall took the spotlight.

"I've come to see how you're doing."

One day, Nia stopped by Anzel's bar again for the first time in a while. The fundraising had been going smoothly. Many elements of managing her secret identity had caught Lynokis by surprise at first, but over time, she had gotten accustomed to it, and she was now steadily swapping between her two professions. At the very least, no large incidents had occurred.

"Well, hello there, stranger. You alone today?"

Lynokis, Fressa, and Gandolph were all out on an adventure at the moment. A lady called Lynette would usually stand in for Lynokis as Nia's personal attendant, though she would also sometimes join the group on their adventures.

"Lynette and I decided we should try and avoid being seen here together. As she goes out on adventures without a disguise, I don't want people to know we're associated."

It made sense to Anzel. Leeno's name was beginning to spread, and he doubted that made matters easier. More and more adventurers were becoming his clientele, likely to try and dig into what Leeno was doing; there wasn't much other reason for them to come to some cheap back-alley bar. There were plenty of cheap bars that didn't sit in such conspicuous locations. The only ones that normally frequented the Shifty Shadow Rat were penniless has-beens and thugs with one foot in the underworld. Adventurers didn't exactly come under the

target demographic.

"You know..." Anzel muttered as his gaze fixed on Nia where she sat by the counter. "Ain't ya way too strong?"

Anzel hadn't seen Nia in a while. To be specific, it was the first time he'd seen Nia since he'd learned about chi. Because he'd gotten used to the energy, there were some things he could sense now that he couldn't before.

"I'm glad you think so." Nia grinned. "You've trained more than I thought. You should've only touched on the basics, and yet you can already understand my strength?"

"I'm not good at really explaining it, and even Fressa said she doesn't get what I'm on about, but..." Anzel sliced some fruit and then squeezed the juice out of it. "It's like...most people's chi I see kinda wavers. Other living creatures too. But I don't feel that from you at all. Instead, your energy is eerily static. Honestly, I can't help but find it a little unnatural."



"Wow, look at you." Nia seemed happy. Honestly, Anzel thought he sounded like he was talking nonsense, but it looked like Nia understood what he meant. "Good job. You'll definitely become much, much stronger, I guarantee you."

"Nice to hear it, I guess."

"Why not join me on a blood-filled path of domination?"

"Yeah, no thanks."

The two idly chatted while Nia drank her freshly pressed juice. Once she was finished with her drink, she stood up.

"Leaving so soon? Actually, wait, why did you come here?"

"I just came to see how my student was doing. If you seemed like you'd hit a wall in your training, I was going to teach you some things, but it seems like I don't need to do that just yet."

"You mean I'm not good enough for you to teach yet?"

"The opposite. You're doing so well that I have nothing to say to you right now. Keep improving at this rate, and I'll be able to teach you the next step in due time."

"Hope so."

After spending a glass of fruit juice's worth of time in the bar, Nia left. The patrons who had gone quiet while the girl had been present picked up conversation again.

Anzel sighed, relieved.

Having seen Nia again, an old thought resurfaced in his mind: that girl wasn't someone he should be getting involved with. She was far too strong. Even just dabbling in chi was enough for him to understand that to an even greater degree than before. He was now more aware than ever that he couldn't even fathom how strong she really was at his current level. Had he known that before meeting her, he'd have run away no matter how pitiful he would have looked. Honestly, he couldn't help but reflect on how stupid his past self had been for daring to pick a fight with her. That matchup was like an ant picking a fight against a dragon.

"Why am I even bothering to entertain this thought?" he muttered to himself. It was already too late. He was completely involved with Nia Liston now. He couldn't pretend they didn't know each other at this point. Now that their relationship had progressed this far, Anzel knew that, rather than futilely running away from her, he should simply continue asking for her tutelage.

The crazier someone was, the crazier the nuisances they would bring along. This whole goal of raising a billion krams was already one hell of a nuisance—and he was already completely wrapped up in it. Someone at his level was nothing compared to her—not in body size but in sheer capability. While his personal conflicts would be with some single random nobody, Nia would no doubt be picking a fight with a whole country.

Nia Liston was not someone that could be contained by a single country. And now that he was so tangled up in her plans, Anzel could already see a future where he'd be immediately implicated in whatever mess she made. He'd already lost the desire to bother running, so he'd pretty much accepted his fate.

Anzel drank his worries away with a glass of cheap alcohol. He couldn't imagine Nia would chase after him if he were to make his escape, but he couldn't tell what Fressa or Lynokis would do. Lynokis was especially frightening. If she decided to act on her own volition rather than wait for orders from Nia, then it wasn't out of the question that she'd wipe him off the face of the earth. He knew too much about the Nia Liston that that personal attendant loved so much.

As for Fressa, they were really just together because they were in a similar boat and only stood to gain by working with each other. Her actual job was as an assassin; she'd kill anyone if she was assigned to do so. He trusted her abilities, but he'd be lying if he said he trusted her.

Gandolph and Lynette were fine. Both of them were good people at their roots.

While so many unpredictable variables were around, acting too recklessly was practically a death sentence. So he'd given up...at least halfway, anyway.

If the day came that he somehow became notably stronger than Lynokis and Fressa both, he'd consider it again. Until then though, he would remain where

he was. At some point, he'd unintentionally become the owner of a bar. Thanks to that, he'd been able to distance himself from the underworld in record time.

He wasn't the most squeaky-clean man in the world, but he was able to earn a living just by running a bar—and he was surprisingly making a profit in the process. His networking during his time as a bodyguard had served him well and he'd been able to order in anything he needed with ease.

And yet.

Anzel couldn't help but feel that he was closer to danger now than ever before.

"Ugh... This tastes like shit."

His muttered words disappeared into the lively raucousness of his bar.

I won't be able to see you again for a while, so let's give you all a quick refresher on chi.

Chi is made up of eight different elements. Broadly speaking, they can be split into two categories of four: internal and external chi.

The four internal chi are purifying chi, fortification chi, pliant chi, and flow chi.

The four external chi are slash chi, divination chi, blunt chi, and breath chi.

There's a ninth chi, but... No, that's something you should achieve with your own strength, so I won't explain that one.

Internal and external chi are always made up of their respective four chi in some fashion. A Technique is taking those types of chi and adjusting their values for a specific result. For example, Rumbling Thunder is made by skewing your chi towards pliant and flow chi.

What's the ideal ratio? Well, I tend to harden my fist with fortification chi, increase the speed of my body with flow chi, and then use pliant chi as a buffer for my movements and the other chi. While on the topic, Lynokis, you need to be aware that even if you think you've managed a Rumbling Thunder with your flow chi at one hundred percent, that's not really a success. If your opponent is able to block it with fortification chi, your fist will definitely break. Never forget

that speed is a double-edged sword.

Still, we've somehow ended up with a good balance of practitioners. Lynokis, you're proficient in flow chi, Lynette is good with pliant chi, Gandolph is good with fortification chi, Anzel is good with fortification and flow chi, and Fressa is good with pliant and external chi in general. Your variety of proficiencies means you can easily fill in each other's gaps.

I've already taught you all the basics, so all that's left is for you to train. Not that I needed to tell you that, did I?

Everyone was watching my talk so seriously, so I thought it was worth the reminder.

Currently, it was winter, and the cold weather had fully moved in. I had finally managed to arrange for all of my earners to gather at once. Fall had been a busy season, what with the training of so many people in chi and our efforts to raise money for the tournament. Time flashed by in the blink of an eye, and before I knew it, it was almost time for winter break.

It felt as if summer vacation had only just ended. You could use pretty words and say that it meant my life was very fulfilling, but it was undeniable that I was so busy I struggled to fit everything in. In fact, I barely had any opportunities to train Anzel and Fressa personally. I would sometimes head to the Shadow Rat to check on their progress, but I could count the times I'd managed that on one hand. We both had our own work to do each day, so we struggled to align our schedules.

Since I would be heading back home to the Liston territories soon, I decided we might as well have everyone meet up for once. They'd met each other when they teamed up for adventures, but they'd never been gathered all at once like this. We'd chosen a booth at the Chocolate Lily's Aroma as our meeting place, opting to avoid Anzel's bar since our little group would no doubt stand out.

I decided to be the one to treat them. In a way, it was like I was rewarding my students for doing so well. Technically, Lynokis was my only *real* student, but the other four practically filled that role now too.

All of my students were now gathered around the same table.

"How much have we made so far?" Fressa asked. Apparently, the others had been wondering the exact same thing as, apart from Lynokis, they all turned to look at me with expectant eyes. We were still miles away from our goal, but everyone had been doing their best for these past few months, so it was natural they'd be curious.

"Surely we've passed the ten million mark by now." Anzel's table manners were better than I had expected. Both he and Fressa had arrived in black suits—perhaps their time in the underworld had made them conscious of their appearance at gatherings like this. I knew that Anzel used to work as a bodyguard, but it turned out Fressa had, as well. No wonder the two gave off that kind of vibe dressed up all smart like this.

"Well?" I asked, turning to look at Lynokis myself. Everyone's gaze followed.

I left managing all of that stuff to Lynokis, so I didn't know the answer either. I hated dealing with numbers, and I hated math just as much.

"Totaling up the value of everyone's contracts from Cedony Trading, we've made a little under twenty million."

Hey, that's not half bad. Trust Lynokis to know the numbers off the top of her head. She could be a little suspicious, but she was good at her job.

But she continued, "We'll fail to meet our target at this rate."

Oh. A billion krams really is quite the insane amount. Ugh, I really didn't think this through.

"However, I understand Master intends to join the moneymaking efforts over the winter break." Having been conscious of the dress code, Gandolph had turned up in the single suit he owned, as cheap as it was; the man really didn't suit this kind of attire. "I would definitely love to join you," he added, eyes sparkling.

He could give all the puppy eyes he wanted; it wasn't possible.

"You remember that I mentioned a little bit of my plans for the winter, right? We've finalized it now so I can tell you properly. I'll be accompanying Leeno as her assistant to the Empire of Flight, Vanderouge, and going on an adventure there." Going to a foreign country to work seemed like a good use of the free

time the winter vacation would grant me.

I had two other objectives in doing this: the first was to ensure that Lynokis's name would be known even overseas in preparation for the tournament; the second was to give me the ability to move around with her. Due to all the work she had put in in the past few months, Leeno was beginning to become known as a famous adventurer. She was recognized as the rookie adventurer with the absurd monster-hunting strength. She gathered a lot of attention when operating around the kingdom, and that had made it much more difficult for me to accompany her. If I was discovered, I would only cause problems for my family.

And so, the easy solution was to simply go to another country. I had already looked into the high-value monsters, so my plan was to go crazy hunting a bunch of them so we could make a fortune but make it look as if Leeno had been the one to do it. It was something I was personally looking forward to as well. I wanted to be able to be as violent as my students, after all.

"Rough estimates make it seem like we'll be able to earn about three hundred million krams," I said.

"That's just the maximum possible amount," Lynokis corrected. "It's assuming that we conveniently bump into the A-tier monsters we're after and that we can stick to the schedule we have prepared and meet the quota we have planned."

Yeah, yeah, I know. Even raising one hundred million would be good enough.

"Small in stature, large in ambition. That's Lily for you," Fressa remarked, looking somewhat exasperated.

After we finished our meal, I told them to hang out longer if they wanted, leaving them some money in case they needed it, and then left. If they wanted to go off and drink, they could.

There would definitely be those who didn't find a place like this an environment they could relax in. As expected, Anzel, Fressa and Gandolph went off to drink after. Lynette was my brother's attendant, so she was going to head back to the school.

"Are you ready to go, Young Mistress?"

"Yes, I am."

Lynokis and I also began putting our own plan into motion. My work schedule for the day? Completely blank. For the first time in a while, my schedule truly was open. That was why we'd decided to use today to clean up some loose ends before vacation.

Our first stop was Cedony Trading. Since winter vacation was almost here, I'd be returning to the Liston Estate, and that meant I needed to buy souvenirs for my parents and the servants of the house. I would also be taking the opportunity to give our greetings to the team. Our relationship with Cedony had begun thanks to Hildetaura's introduction, and ever since, they had been a massive help. They would be assisting us with our ventures out to Vanderouge as well, so I wanted to at least show some goodwill.

"Welcome. Please wait a moment." The second we entered the flagship store, the employee disappeared to the back. They probably dashed off to call a higher-up—I appreciated their swift response.

"Young Mistress, look."

"Oh, are these what I think they are?"

The area around the entrance of the shop was stocked with more general goods, but the value of the goods increased as you went deeper into the store. Where Lynokis pointed was a dedicated section with a special theme.

"They are. It's the 'Princess Possessions' that I've heard so much about." A number of the students had been talking about it in class. Hildetaura's *Cooking Princess* program that had started shortly after the start of the semester had been steadily building in popularity. These Princess Possessions were a result of that. Essentially, they were merchandise made based on Hildetaura and her program.

Unofficial fake goods were already fairly rampant, including those of me and Reliared, but these were certainly official—Hildetaura-styled knives for adults, cooking utensils, aprons, spices, stationery, etc. Wait, why did they make stationery? No, maybe that did make sense—Hildetaura would often take notes

on what the chef told her. So they even took advantage of that, huh?	



The most popular item seemed to be the recipe book.

"Today, I will be making a simple hot-spring egg and a stew inspired by the Ihee region."

And then there was the MagiPad constantly running episodes of *Cooking Princess*.

Hey, I've seen this episode. You'd mix a hot-spring egg with this stew that looked as thick as mud. When the ingredients combined, the taste of the egg remained. It looked nice, honestly.

This really is popular, huh? They were already making a lot of money off of the program, and now they were trying to make even more. I decided I'd buy the spices and the recipe book for now; it would be perfect as a souvenir for the chef of the Liston Estate.

"Young Mistress, look at what's next to it."

"I'm good."

Next to the Princess Possessions was a sprawling space dedicated to the paper plays. It was so huge that you didn't even have to search for it. Merchandise related to the paper plays airing on the Silver Channel was lined up, but I'd already gotten sick of seeing it. So many students carried the merch around with them, and Reliared didn't hesitate to shove the merch into my face when she got the chance. She'd even forced some of it on me, so it was decorating my room too.

But... Well... Were there any wooden dolls of the Red Knight...? Neal seemed like he really wanted one... *Oh, they're out of stock. Guess they're as popular as always.*

"Young Mistress, over here."

And then there was my merch, though it didn't have its own dedicated space. I hadn't stumbled upon a winning proposal yet, so there wasn't all that much.

"My merch doesn't really have much to do with *me* anymore." There were portraits of me—that made sense. But then why were there little wooden carvings of dogs? Were they the dogs I had won against in the races? *Quit it.*

You're going to hurt the owners' feelings. Then again, there were quite a lot lined up. Was there actually a demand?

"Miss Liston, apologies for keeping you waiting."

One of the higher-ups arrived while we were wandering about.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr. Dallon."

He looked as if he were getting on in years a little, like an elderly butler. I wasn't sure what his specific occupation or title was, but at the very least, I knew he was the right hand of Marju Cedony, the current president of Cedony Trading. Dallon undoubtedly had the authority of an executive.

"My deepest apologies, but the president is currently unavailable."

"No, it's okay. I'm not here for any pressing matter anyway." The only reason I was here was to give my greetings before the winter break. If the president wasn't here, then that was fine. Even if he was, the last thing I wanted to do was take up too much of his time. "I will be returning home for the holidays soon, so I just came to say thank you for all the assistance you've given me since the summer. A merchant of Cedony is no doubt busy—it wouldn't be good for me to take up his time."

"Ah, I see. I'm sure the master would love to come greet you though."

Dallon was definitely just being polite. Though even if there was some part of it that was genuine, I really meant it when I said it wasn't something worth taking the president's time for.

"Please pass on the message if you can. I will be relying on you for our expedition over the winter, as well."

"Yes, I will make sure to pass your words on."

And with that, I'd finished almost everything I'd come to do. All I had to do now was pay for the souvenirs and then we could leave—

"Though if you would permit me to comment, you're raising the money at a very fast pace."

What? Was he referring to the billion krams? I'd left it almost entirely to my students so I really wasn't all that knowledgeable on the numbers, though the

discussion earlier had made it apparent that they had earned around twenty million. Honestly, I never asked because it would just make me jealous—I wanted to go around beating up monsters too! Everything was proceeding smoothly though, so I really should be happy for them.

"Have you decided how you intend to make use of it? We at Cedony can be of assistance in this regard, as well," Dallon continued.

This man might come across as a butler, but he was undeniably a businessman in his own right. Of course he would be curious how we intended to make use of such a large sum of money. If such a large amount was involved, there was always the chance to find a business opportunity to turn a profit. It was natural for a merchant to be curious.

But at the moment, I couldn't tell him. The way we intended to "use" it was technically handing it over to the king so that we could hold a national martial arts tournament. You couldn't really say that I was the one using it in that scenario.

We had only been working with Cedony for two or three months, and yet they had already been a massive help, so if possible, I'd like it if we could help them profit in some way, but we'd not even raised a tenth of what we needed right now. We weren't at a stage where we could even start making negotiations.

"Sorry, but this is all a little difficult for a child." So I decided that I would avoid the question. For a moment, the man's eyes widened—was my response a surprise? Come on, I'm clearly still a kid. Was my answer really that surprising? "That aside, I want to buy souvenirs for the people back home. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Ah... Ahem. Yes, our products over here have been selling well recently." Dallon hid his momentary surprise by clearing his throat and then putting on his best business smile as he directed me towards the merchandise for *Cooking Princess* and the Silvers' paper play program.

I immediately told him that I had no need for the paper play merchandise.

And so, the second semester came to an end, and I returned home with Neal

on his airship once again. Unfortunately, in order to make sure I could get a string of free days at the end of the vacation period, I once more had to enter hell.

"Hey, Nia! Glad you could make it! Let's get going!"

The moment we arrived on the island of the Liston Estate, a certain distinctive face was there waiting to immediately drag me to the airship used by the production crew. Before I was even allowed to enter the house that I hadn't seen for months, Bendelio was shoving me right into a magivision schedule from hell, as if summer had come back once again.

My life was so busy now I almost yearned for the days I was bedridden.

At first they'd sounded like they were talking nonsense, then they'd become troublesome, and now they were VIPs who shook him to his merchant's soul.

Marju Cedony, President of Cedony Trading, looked down at the thick stacks of contracts that had so quickly piled up in his office drawer, and gulped. Every time he looked at them, he remembered the deal he had struck with Nia Liston that summer, and every time he brought that moment to mind, he broke out in a cold sweat.

After graduating from elementary school, Marju had immediately begun helping his parents with the company. As expected, he'd started as a gofer doing a bunch of small errands. It had been roughly forty years since then. What had started as a midsized store had gradually expanded into one of the biggest trade associations in the kingdom.

Originally, his older brother and sister had been the ones in line to be the successors, and their parents had shelled out the money to send them to middle school for that purpose—something that had been much more expensive back in those days—but then somehow, the youngest son with no expectations placed upon him had been the one to take over the company.

Over those forty years, there had been both good times and bad times. There were times he'd been tricked, times he had seen through another's tricks, times he'd earned profits in the most unexpected places, times he'd suffered massive losses. A lot had happened.

He wasn't so delusional to think he was born with some rare business talent. It was thanks to his trusted subordinates, his family supporting him when he was discouraged, and the extreme luck bestowed upon him by the god of trade that the company had made it to where it was today. He'd not made any significant mistakes in the last decade or so, instead solidly building up a foundation and slowly but steadily making profit after profit.

The one mistake he'd almost made was during his negotiations with Nia Liston. That stack of contracts was incredibly valuable—there was a substantial profit to be made. But if, back then, he had rejected Nia Liston's proposal, he wouldn't be here. The company would be close to going under, and he would have had no choice but to frantically run around the kingdom trying to earn a profit.

After taking a deep breath in and then out again, Marju closed the drawer—now one contract heavier.

What made it feel so heavy was not its physical weight. No matter how many times the memories flooded back, he wanted nothing more than to hide his face in his hands at that reminder of his own blunder.

"Young miss, this is not a place for us to indulge a child's fantasies."

He couldn't help but tremble in regret even now every time he called to mind what he'd said in his negotiations with Nia Liston that day. He didn't even want to consider what would've happened if he'd said everything he'd wanted to say at that moment—the thought of it was terrifying.

Nia Liston was a child. He had only agreed to a meeting with her because she had arrived bearing a letter of introduction from one of their honored guests, Third Princess of Altoire, Hildetaura. At most, Marju's impression of Nia at that point had been that she was the daughter of the Liston family who frequently appeared on magivision. He had once considered that he might like to sell her merchandise at their store one day, given he had a great interest in and respect for the magivision industry. He'd also thought to himself that her distinct white hair would be good for attracting customers.

But that was it.

And then, that same girl had suddenly strode into their place of business and

asked for something that not only made him doubt his ears but also made him speechless. All he could do was scoff.

"I want to raise one billion krams in two years, and I'd like your assistance."

Personally, his reaction was perfectly understandable given the request had come from a six-year-old child. Any sane adult would already laugh at such a request, but someone in his field even more so. No one knew the efforts one had to go through to earn money better than a merchant.

If she was being genuine, then Marju could only assume that something was wrong with the child's head. That, or she was incredibly sheltered. He had opened his mouth to deal with her under that assumption. Before he could continue though, he'd remembered that *Her Royal Highness Hildetaura Altoire* had gone out of her way to write a letter of introduction for this girl, and he had noticed that the personal attendant standing behind her was watching him with dangerous eyes—his mouth had quickly shut.

The stare from the attendant had been unusually intense, as if she'd lost everything in a scam and was now prepared to swindle others. Marju had become accustomed to threats and intimidation over the course of his career, and yet even that experience had not prevented him from wanting to shrink away from the seriousness in her expression.

Somewhere deep inside, he'd begun to think he really might be killed if he wasn't careful.

His decision to keep his mouth shut and hear out the rest of the girl's proposal might have been the wisest move he had ever made in his forty-or-so years as a merchant. Perhaps the god of trading had smiled down upon him that day. He didn't truly believe in the existence of gods, but that one moment made him feel like it might be worth changing that mindset.

"That adventurer, Leeno, and her comrades are certainly impressive," Dallon, his right-hand man who had brought along the most recent contract, commented as he stood behind his master who lingered near his desk after closing the drawer.

After being locked in those vivid memories of three months past, Marju came back to the present. Leeno's party had hauled in yet another batch of monsters

they had just hunted; he had been by his drawer getting the applicable contracts together.

"They've crossed twenty million now," Dallon told Marju as the president returned to his paperwork-filled desk.

"They're fast. It's only been three months since they started." And that meant Nia Liston's pledge to raise a billion krams in two years was serious.

The work that Cedony Trading had taken on was the arrangement of airship travel to allow Leeno and her party members to travel to any floating islands they needed to and the selling of any monster carcasses, manastones, or other materials they acquired on their adventures. They were also placed in charge of the storage and management of any money made from those sales. In other words, they were to take on all the troublesome work such as negotiating prices with the adventurer's guild for the materials and preparing airships to allow them to travel.

Cedony would receive a small commission from everything they raised, so they weren't doing it for nothing; in fact, they were earning a notable amount of money from it. Their arrangements meant that the more money their party raised, the more money Cedony received, so they were never working at a loss.

Dallon smirked. "I told you, didn't I? That child is capable." At the time, Marju had thought it was simply a child's fantasies, but upon telling Dallon what had happened, his confidant had told him it was good that he'd accepted the commission.

Dallon was someone who chose to stay by Marju's side even though he had been expected to start and run a business of his own. He was a trusted subordinate and close friend whom Marju would place complete faith in. They had been colleagues back when Marju was lower down the ladder, and they'd grown old in almost the same environment and circumstances. Marju would never believe the man's words to be mistaken—and he could see now that his judgment was indeed correct.

"If they'd partnered up with one of our competitors, it might've been over for us," Marju muttered.

Twenty million krams in three months—that group was really managing it. It

was no longer about what-ifs. The possibility of raising one billion krams in two years—the possibility that had never truly been impossible—was so clearly visible right in front of them.

There was no way he could let such a lucrative client escape his grasp. The more they earned, the more he pushed away the thought of how much he would've lost if he'd acted on instinct. He was incredibly lucky that they weren't taken by anyone else.

However, two questions remained:

"Have you heard anything about how they intend to use such a large sum of money?" Marju asked.

"No. I've made attempts to bring conversation in that direction, but no luck."

A billion krams was no small sum of money; that wasn't something you could make working a regular job. Since they had an established deadline, it was reasonable to assume they already knew what they wanted to use it on. Honestly, he could smell money from that mystery project. If it was moving that much money, it had to be big.

"From what I've seen, I don't think they quite know themselves what it's for."

"Really... Well, if the royal family is involved, then perhaps they'll come talk to us directly at some point."

The third princess was definitely involved—she had written a letter of introduction by her own hand, so it was only natural to assume she knew where that one billion krams would be going. What was most important was that it seemed unthinkable that Hildetaura Altoire would introduce Nia Liston to their company purely out of the goodness of her heart. That princess was very cunning for a child and already had strong beliefs as to how she should conduct herself.

And that meant that first and foremost, she was thinking of how to benefit the royal family.

It was because Marju was aware of her intentions that he knew there was a large possibility that the reason for her involvement was the opportunity for substantial profit. She had introduced Nia because she wanted to profit from

whatever this was all leading towards. That meant those one billion krams would be used for something that could be so lucrative it had royalty making moves. Something that would involve the whole kingdom seemed likely. If only he could learn in advance just how that money was going to be used, he could make preparations to secure an even bigger payday.

What was scariest was that the only reason Marju could make all of this speculation was because he had accepted Nia Liston's request. He was *really* lucky he hadn't turned her down.

"Oh, of course. I forgot to mention this to you, sir." These days, Marju's stomach kept doing flips every time he thought about Nia Liston, but as if entirely unaware of this, Dallon casually spoke his next words: "Miss Liston came by to greet you today as she'll be returning home shortly."

"Oh? Did she make an appointment?"

"No. She said she decided against making one as that was all she came by to do. She left a message thanking you for your assistance and said that she hoped she could expect your continued support during her winter expedition."

And there was the other question.

"They arranged an express trip to Vanderouge, right? Has it been prepared?" Why was she going overseas?

It had to be because she was going over there to make money, but why go all the way to a foreign country? Was she going to do something big that couldn't be done in Altoire? It had to be that; there was no other explanation.

Marju could smell money in this opportunity yet again. If possible, he'd love to accompany them, but...given his position, he couldn't exactly leave the company building for days at a time.

"It has, sir. All that remains is to prepare their entry permits and refuel the airship."

"Apply for their permits with the reason for entry that Leeno will be serving as an escort for Cedony Trading. This should be enough to get an adventurer in. Nothing has changed about the length of their stay, right? And you said that she

may have several companions accompanying her? Register them as members of the crew. We'll leave assisting with their work to the Vanderouge branch."

"Yes, sir."

Dallon bowed and left the room.

With only Marju left, the office fell into silence. He reached his hand out and turned on the MagiPad floating nearby.

"Today, I'll be racing with the Taktaran family of the seventh class's beloved dog, Puck!"

Marju could only blink at the white-haired girl on his screen.

He quietly turned it off again.

He knew this was a situation of his own making, but he really didn't want to see Nia Liston, at least for now. If he did, he was sure he really would end up with a stomachache.

Chapter 3: To the Empire of Flight

The winter vacation period was much shorter than the summer break. In order to make the most of it, my recording schedule was pushed to its absolute limit yet again; it was just a repeat of the summer from hell. Actually, because it was shoved into a shorter time frame, it was even *worse*. Everything was crushed together far tighter than it had been over the summer. At this point, I was only returning home to sleep.

I could count on one hand the number of times I got to see my family over the winter break. There wasn't even any time for us to sit down and chat, no dinners with all of us gathered together.

The production crew that had become my close allies after that summer from hell looked just as miserable. The never-ending recordings and buildup of fatigue left the makeup artist pale, and she tried many times to run away crying at the pain of being unable to spend time with her new partner—we made sure to catch her though.

The cameraman's eyes were dead as he mindlessly carried out his work each day, his mind utterly broken by the packed schedule. He almost looked like an assassin that had lost all emotion after witnessing the brutal deaths of his parents at a young age.

Our director would often be caught staring with empty eyes at the charm his daughter had made for him.

The rest of the staff would threaten to quit, would hiss Bendelio's name with resentment, and would suggest pretending I was ill so we could all go on a relaxing trip together. Each recording set was filled with swearing, hatred that couldn't even be expressed in words, whispers of the devil that were hard to resist, and extreme situations where the true nature of us humans could be glimpsed.

And yet, somehow, we managed to make it past this too.

Let's all go on a trip one day, after all. We can make a schedule where we do some recording at a hot-spring resort and make sure our own relaxation time is factored in. I'll put a word in. Bendelio can go screw himself.

Twenty-six recordings in ten days were complete. Now I could spend the last few days on a fulfilling vacation—or at least, a fulfilling adventure—without a worry.

"Nia, make sure you greet Prince Hiero for us while you're there. Take good care of my daughter, Lynokis."

"Yes, father. I'll see you again soon. You too, mother, brother."

Everyone was gathered at the entrance of the house in the early morning to see me and Lynokis off as we left for the docks while the sky was still dark outside. The most frantic part of my winter break was over.

The neighboring empire of Vanderouge, where we would be headed to make money this time, was much too far for me to go without telling my parents, and my status as the daughter of an aristocrat meant it wouldn't be so easy for me to cross the border on my own. Though I had gone through the necessary procedures, I would still be going in secret, keeping my name hidden while we worked. So long as I didn't make a big show of it, no one would ever suspect I was an upper-class child.

At the very least, I had negotiated with Cedony Trading to get entry permits prepared for us. I doubted my cover would be blown as long as I avoided getting involved in any major incidents. A secret visit from an aristocrat was to be treated with the highest level of care. If their identity were to be discovered, it had the potential to lead to an international incident. Should something like that happen even once, dignitaries from other countries would find it much harder to safely travel to the country in the future.

Putting aside the whole part about monster hunting to raise a billion krams, this was a trip to a neighboring country, and that meant I needed an excuse that could persuade my parents. I would be traveling such a distance that I couldn't simply hide where I was going like I'd done with the Umbral Arena—it would be a multiple-night stay, as well. There was no way they'd allow it without knowing

why I was going.

As such, I had made sure to prepare a separate reason. It wasn't as if I could just tell them I was going out to earn money, after all.

First was a visit to see Hildetaura's brother and the second prince of Altoire, Hiero Altoire—who was also the acting chairman of the capital's broadcasting station. I'd asked Hildetaura to pass on the message, and Hiero had sent a letter back saying, "I'd definitely love to meet Nia Liston. Would she be willing to come visit while on her trip over winter vacation? I'll be in Vanderouge at that time as well." We were able to use that letter to make it seem as if I'd been invited to meet him. By the way, we'd never met.

There was no way an aristocrat could refuse such a direct invitation from royalty, and it helped that I seemed enthusiastic to go, so my parents had agreed to it. This goes without saying, but my parents were still incredibly busy with work, so they were unable to accompany me. Neal wouldn't be accompanying me on this trip either. I would be going in secret, and we could only stay there for a few days, so it was decided that it would be best for me and Lynokis to quickly head there and back alone.

It all went according to plan.

Hiero was currently marketing magivision in Vanderouge. It turned out the empire had a strong interest in the industry, and so Hiero had brought MagiPads to the country several times to let them see the real thing. The technology to make magivision sold for a staggering amount of money, well beyond a billion krams, so it was neither easy nor within a country's funds to introduce it without careful consideration.

The reason Hiero had been making repeated trips was to persuade those who opposed the integration of magivision and to gather possible investors. I had desperately been wanting to go to Vanderouge for our mission, so through Hildetaura's connections, I was able to ask Hiero, who was due to head back to the empire at the time, for assistance.

The idea of going to give my greetings wasn't just a front, but we were both busy, so we planned to not spend too much time together. I was almost purely using it as a means to persuade my parents to allow me to travel there in the

first place, so the quick meeting would probably suffice.

The second reason for the trip ended up being something that my parents fortunately reminded me of: to have a look at their airships. As expected of the Empire of Flight, Vanderouge was able to build high performance airships unrivaled by any other country, being home to its own advanced and elaborate magic technology unique to the land. It had come up a few times before that apparently my parents wanted to gift me one of my own.

Though originally intended as a gift for beginning school, we'd been unable to come to an agreement so it had been postponed—until now, that is. Neal's vintage airship had been made in Vanderouge, as well. It was an average airship over there, but it was of much higher quality than the ones usually found in Altoire.

"If you're going to Vanderouge, then it's the perfect time to go find an airship you want while you're there," my father had said. I had tried to refuse, saying it was far too luxurious a present for a child who wasn't even a successor to the family, but he'd immediately told me that children shouldn't be so considerate of such matters, so I'd chosen to accept.

It was true that it wasn't the child's job to refuse a gift from their parents. They were my family; I was their child. That was exactly why they didn't forcefully stop me from going through with the insanely packed schedule for my work. I was doing it by my own will, and they were respecting that. No matter how impossible the schedule seemed, I never refused, so they never said anything, and they never stopped me either. I would still complain though. I would never forgive Bendelio. Ever.

Anyway, that was why I decided to simply accept their offer. That was what it meant to be family. That wasn't to say I didn't plan to work hard so I could pay them back though. And I couldn't deny that having my own airship would no doubt make a lot of things easier.

For the first leg of the trip, we boarded my brother's airship and headed off for the main island of Altoire. I'd been here many times for recordings—it was a familiar sight.

"Please be careful, Young Mistress." The crew of the airship let us off at the

port and then set off back to the estate.

Mornings at the port started early—I needed to quickly get changed while it was still dark and there were few people around. Looking as if I was running to get shelter from the cold wind, I circled around the back of the line of warehouses with my change of clothes in hand.

After changing into a thin, light training gi, I used the magic dye to turn my hair black. With this, I looked the same as that young girl who had gone to the Umbral Arena all those months ago.

"I look forward to working with you, Leeno."

By the time I finished changing into my disguise, Lynokis had also changed from her servant attire into her light adventurer's gear.

"And the same to you, Lily."

From here, we were no longer Nia Liston and her attendant, Lynokis, but the adventurer Leeno and her assistant Lily.

Now, let us leave for the flight bound to Vanderouge so kindly prepared for us by Cedony.

"Right, I forgot they said they were going to prepare a state-of-the-art highspeed liner."

Lynokis's words did nothing to dispel my doubts.

A state-of-the-art...high-speed liner...

"Is this truly an airship?" It looked nothing like the ones I'd seen before. The airship stationed in front of us was in the shape of a big pole. It had a concerningly simple shape, as if a piece of a metal rod had been cut off and then sharpened at the tip. Would it be right to call it streamlined? Or was it the shape of a pen tip? The whole thing seemed to be made of metal, and that was what we would be riding to our destination.

The fact it was made from metal was worrying, but even more worrying was the fact it wasn't shaped like an airship to begin with. I could see windows, so at least I'd be able to see outside, but would such a confined space really be safe?

Would it really be possible to see our surroundings and the direction we were going?

The airship was probably a little smaller than a midsized ship, and from its shape, it could probably cut through the wind with ease, which most likely increased its speed. But more than anything else, the bizarre shape was worrying.

"It appears they've attempted to emulate something to increase its speed," Lynokis said.

What the hell were they emulating?

Wait a second. Thinking about the way certain wild animals are structured, maybe this is actually quite logical.

I was a little bit more convinced than before, at least. I'd never seen an airship this shape before, but I *had* seen a similar animal. It wasn't unusual for even martial arts to imitate the movements of animals, so it seemed natural that people would sometimes imitate the shapes of animals in their creations for rationality and convenience.

"Leeno! Hello there!" While we were standing there, staring up at the strangely shaped airship, a well-dressed middle-aged man came down the ramp. "Is it okay for us to depart?! Ah, that child will be accompanying you, right?!"

When Lynokis, or should I say, Leeno nodded, the man beckoned us onboard. Were they acquainted? If it was someone from Cedony, then that seemed likely.

The cold air was cut off the moment we entered the high-speed liner. The door immediately shut, and the ramp was removed. *Guess they were waiting* for us. Thank you for coming out so early in the morning.

The interior was...well, it was rather cramped and felt awfully enclosed, just as I'd thought it would. It didn't help that the ceiling was so low; the ship was likely split into upper and lower floors. There were exposed pipes along the metal walls that did nothing but plant fear in the heart of an old fogy like me. I still could not fathom how a hunk of metal could so freely float through the sky.

Well, at least if worse came to worst and we crashed, I wouldn't die.

"It's certainly a strangely shaped airship," Lynokis remarked as she took off her coat.

"It's the latest model from Vanderouge," the man said with a truly proud look on his face. "This baby's *really* fast. It was designed focusing specifically on speed." Lynokis had told me something similar before we came. Usually, airships would take three or four days to arrive at Vanderouge when factoring in pit stops along the way, but this airship here only took one.

"Leaving at this time, we'll arrive at the empire by the evening."

So soon? That meant our travel time was about half a day. We had structured our schedule factoring in that we had arranged with Cedony to get us there as fast as possible, but half a day was far faster than I had expected. What unprecedented speed.

Naturally, this was a miscalculation I was pleased with. What reason would I have to be upset about more time to spend in Vanderouge? Our time there was already so short, I welcomed every extra minute.

"Is it really that fast?" I asked.

"Surprised, huh? The world's truly become even smaller."

The world has become smaller. Those were the words spoken by Dimiarro, the first sky pirate to leave a mark in history.

In the days when there were few means of transport between the floating islands, people all over had suffered from oppression within their countries with no way to escape. Dimiarro was the one who had traveled the skies, liberating them.

Citizens are the lifeblood of a country. That was what Hildetaura had said all those months ago. If I were to take her words, Dimiarro had welcomed aboard the souls of countries around the world and carried them away. He'd drained the blood from the islands poisoned by oppression, dictatorship, impoverishment, and hunger.

Those events had led to the rise of sky pirates and rebellions without war—or

to put it differently, the rise of covert escapes. The country that had suffered the most as a result of that was Mythgalis—an empire that had ruled over thirty percent of the world at the time—those mass exoduses soon leading to the fall of the country. The blood had been removed from its body, after all.

I'd learned in class that civil war had broken out due to the absolute depletion of supplies and food which had ultimately ended in Mythgalis's destruction. It had fallen apart by itself, without any interference from outside countries.

At least, that was what people said, but it had happened so long ago that no one could really be sure of the true story anymore. Airship technology had continued to evolve. However, history can be falsified for the convenience of the victors. How much of it was really true?

"But between you and me, the fuel costs a lot," the man explained. "Enough that something like this isn't suitable for everyday use. Carrying capacity wasn't given as much importance either, since the designers focused on speed alone."

In other words, it was still in the prototype stage, or at least there was a lot of room for improvement.

"You prepared such an expensive airship just for me?" Lynokis asked.

"But of course. We at Cedony Trading vow to do our utmost to support you, Leeno."

This man *really* felt like a businessman in that instance; he didn't come across as a regular crew member.

The merchantlike man guided us up the staircase. The inside was split into two floors as I had surmised, with the upper floor brightly lit and reasonably well decorated. It still felt a little claustrophobic though. There were at least many small, round windows, so you could see far on both the starboard and port sides. Ahead of us was a door, likely where the control room was located.

"Hey, get us moving," the man said towards the door—I must have been right, in that case. "What do you think, little lady? Even within Vanderouge, an airship like this is unusual. Appearancewise, it's certainly a little strange in general, I'll admit."

Oh, he spoke to me this time. Maybe he'd noticed me looking suspiciously

around the ship. Could you blame me? I could barely imagine metal flying through the air, and the shape of this huge airship made me feel no safer.

"It's in the shape of a bird or a fish, right?" It had no tail or dorsal fin, but it resembled a fish in shape, or a bird gliding through the air with its wings folded in.

"Good eye. You're quite right—this airship was designed with a bird's body in mind."

I glanced outside and saw the port disappear from view beneath us. There was no wind or sensation or even sound so I hadn't quite realized at first, but it seemed we'd already taken off.

"Take a look outside. This ship actually boosts forward using the blast from an explosion."

A blast? I looked outside just as the man had instructed.

Lynokis... You don't have to look outside the same window as me. Look out the next one. It's too narrow for both of us to look out the same one comfortably like this. Stop clinging to me.

When we reached a certain altitude, an announcement echoed out from the voice pipe running along the walls of the ship: "Beginning acceleration. There will be turbulence, so please ensure you have a firm grip on something secure or lie low on the ground." After some warnings, a countdown began. I grabbed onto the window frame.

Lynokis... You don't have to support me like this. Don't grab onto my shoulders like that.

"Three, two, one, ignition."

Bwooooooooh!

A large explosion of sound greater than even Rumbling Thunder blasted out along with a great shaking of the ship. It felt as if there were a large force dragging me from the side, and I put all my strength into not being thrown backwards.

The harbor of the main island of the Liston territories below us completely

disappeared from view in an instant.

"Phew. You'll be fine now, Leeno."

The windproofing must have been top-notch because I didn't feel as if the airship was moving at all, even though I could see clear as day that we were. The small islands and clouds that I could see in the distance were moving past us at an incredible pace. We must have been going exceptionally fast.

"It's meant to take half a day, hm?" I could certainly believe it at this speed. It was overwhelmingly faster than any airship I had boarded until now. It was certainly some amazing technology.

Honestly, I kind of wanted one. But this...might be a bit expensive as a gift for entering school.

"This is the first time you've met Lily, yes? Lily, this is Tork Cedony, son of the current representative of the company," Lynokis said, introducing us.

By representative, did she mean the president of the company? So this was the son of the man I had negotiated with as Nia Liston. The president's name was Marju Cedony, I thought. He was a generous man who had fully agreed to assist with my goal of earning one billion krams—something that no doubt sounded like nothing but childish nonsense to him—without asking too many questions. I didn't have much interaction with him as I had been leaving the adventuring to Lynokis and my other disciples, but I thought I would like to go pay him another visit after all the help he'd been—making a proper appointment this time.

So it turned out that this man, Tork—who I had thought came across like a businessman—really was a businessman after all. In fact, he was even the son of the president. Was he his father's successor? Did that not make him quite the big shot here...? Were their expectations for humble Leeno so grand that we'd be accompanied by someone of such standing? Or was it something he was doing for the sake of it?

"Tork, this is my adorable little apprentice, Lily. Isn't she cute?"

Did you call me cute twice?

"Your apprentice, you say? She's awfully young..."

"Indeed. She is both my student and my beloved younger sister—no, my beloved daughter—no... She's a very close loved one. Yes, let's put it that way. Isn't she cute?"

What's with this vague yet intimate relationship that implies a history but places us somewhere between friends and lovers? And stop calling me cute.



"I see. Your situation seems complicated." His talent as a businessman was shining through—able to express his interest, yet showing no desire to ask anything too forward. "Ah, there's no need for us to stand around here. Breakfast has been prepared, so let us settle down first before we talk about our plans going forward."

As we'd been told earlier, the airship really was made primarily for speed, so the dining area was small, and there were only a few cabins for passengers. It was made purely for transportation.

"If it were able to hold a lot of cargo, the logistics of it all would likely be very different. But there's a lot of problems with that." Tork spoke as the three of us sat down at a rather cramped table and began eating our light breakfast. "That's why this airship is focused primarily on carrying people. For a merchant, though, it still has its uses."

I imagined there were plenty of people who would use an airship like this if it meant they could arrive at a neighboring country in just half a day.

"By the way, Leeno, I hear you're going to Vanderouge to hunt monsters?"

This man certainly talks a lot, I couldn't help but silently observe as I left the conversation to Lynokis. But then that topic came up, and immediately I realized what was going on. Tork was most likely trying to find out what monsters Lynokis was going to hunt.

This skilled fresh adventurer whose name had quickly become known all across Altoire was working to save up one billion krams. If you knew that much about her, you could naturally guess why she would be flying overseas. Plus, she'd already applied for permission to hunt in Vanderouge and submitted a schedule to Cedony.

Now how would a merchant take advantage of that?

"Yes, it was getting a little difficult for me to move around freely in Altoire, and I had errands to run in Vanderouge, so I thought I may as well do some hunting on the side. It's like a short-term job, I suppose."

"It's gotten difficult for you? Do you have intentions of moving your base of operations out of the capital?"

"I still haven't thought that far. But, this child..."

Hm? Why am I coming up?

"I don't want my relationship with my beloved Lily known. It is already impossible for me to walk around the streets of Altoire with this adorable child. But I still want to let this beloved child experience as much of life as possible, as my adorable, beloved apprentice."

I was leaving everything here to Lynokis, simply nodding along. Only someone who knew my situation so deeply could create a convincing story for us. But I would forbid her from calling me adorable later. Things would turn troublesome if she kept calling me that, so I needed her to stop.

"We may go on more adventures like this in the future," she continued, "so I would be very grateful if you let us ride this airship again."

"Yes, of course. But please definitely tell us in advance when you intend to move out of the capital! That's a promise, okay? I'll cry if you say you're moving to a different country entirely!" As expected of a merchant, he'd seen possible prey and clamped onto it. I could sense his strong will to not let her get away. But such worries were unnecessary. If his assistance meant we could arrive at our destination in half a day, that meant we had half a day more to spare—I would use that extra time to help Tork...no, Cedony Trading in return.

"Hey, Master." I had been staying quiet to not interrupt the adults' conversation, but I chose now to speak. "I think Mr. Tork might want you to hunt a certain monster while we're in Vanderouge. He's already helped us so much; should you not hear him out?"

As the one who really had a higher standing here, my word was absolute. Tork, unaware of that fact, was looking at me, the one who had made the proposal, and Lynokis, the one who was ostensibly in the position to make the decision, with expectant eyes.

So you have an ulterior motive for joining us, after all. Well, he was a merchant. They weren't really the type to do charity work.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly ask that of you! You have your own schedule, right, Leeno? But if you're willing to consider it, I could offer a very pretty penny for That didn't sound like a bad deal, at least. We wouldn't be making a loss in that case. But even if they paid us extra, I was sure that Cedony would be profiting much more than us.

Leaving the money talk to the adults, I retired to my room. It was a small room with only a bed and a shelf, but at the very least, it was a single room. It was nice to have a room away from that suspicious girl for once. It even had a lock.

To the surprise of no one, Lynokis had protested the lack of a double room, but they'd insisted they only had individual ones. There was nothing else for it if they didn't have anything else! I'll just make sure to lock the door.

"Hnnnngh...!" I gave a big stretch and threw myself onto the bed. *Ow. That was harder than I expected*. But my body, exhausted both physically and mentally from the tightly packed recording schedule that had only concluded yesterday, was soon overcome by drowsiness.

Would we be at Vanderouge by the time I woke up? I was excited. This would be my first monster-hunting expedition in this life. I wanted the opportunity to let my fists go free without restraint already.

Sometime in the middle of my excitement thinking about the fun-filled days ahead, I ended up sinking into a deep sleep.

"Emergency! Emergency!"

Noises I couldn't quite discern intruded on my deep slumber. *Emergency...?* Before my groggy mind could recognize the words, the next racket resounded through the room.

"Emergency stop in three seconds! Three, two, one..."

Thwunk!

"Whoa?!" A great sideways rocking caused my body to float in the air for a moment before I hit the wall at full force and fell off the bed. "Ugh, that hurt..."

I was caught off guard. I was *really* caught off guard. If it had been some enemy or an intruder, I could've detected their presence and responded immediately, but just a voice hadn't been enough to wake me. Without a human's presence, I couldn't respond right away... What an unexpected oversight. I was pretty sure in my previous life, I'd managed to take down a hundred people coming to attack me in the middle of the night without hassle. It really had been easy as pie then.

Well, at least that impact woke me up completely.

Rubbing my head and the elbow that had slammed into the wall, I stood myself up and looked out the window. It...wasn't evening yet—the sky was still blue, and the sun was still shining in the sky. So we hadn't arrived at Vanderouge yet. The islands off in the distance weren't moving, which meant we'd fully stopped for some reason...

"An emergency...?" I thought I'd heard those words while I was sleeping, but I'd been half-awake at the time and couldn't process it fully.

Well, sitting around won't do me any good. I'm awake now, so I may as well go see what's going on.

When I exited my room, I saw a number of the ship's crew clinging onto the windows. From their outfits, they must've been mechanics.

I guess what's happening is over that way? I could only see out the right side from my room, but it seemed whatever had caused the commotion was on the opposite side.

"Excuse me," I said as I squeezed my way past a young worker so I could peek out the window myself. I instantly saw exactly what the problem was. The spectacle before me had to be the emergency situation. No wonder they'd had to stop the airship.

"Can we do anything about that?" I asked one of the nearby workers.

There was a look of hesitation on his face when he responded to me. "Mmm... Well, that's for the captain to decide, so I can't say, but if you ask me, there's nothing we can do. I feel bad, but with this ship's equipment, we have no way to help."

Right, an airship made solely for speed wouldn't be built for battle. In most situations, if they were targeted, they could easily outrun the problem by just zooming away; there'd be no heavy weaponry to slow them down.

"By the way, is that a kind of skyfish?" I asked.

"Yup. It's a squid."

A squid, hm?

"Do they appear here often?"

"I don't think so. Skyfish in general aren't really that common, and one of that size even less so. People can run into them anywhere, though."

So that ship out there had unfortunately bumped into one and, even more unfortunately, been attacked by it. Skyfish were like migratory birds, swimming in the sky and passing you by before you knew it. Apparently, they had only begun to appear after the Great Float from long ago, so it was likely these were originally aquatic species that had also been affected by the sudden change in environment.

With no uniformity in size or species, they were difficult to catch. The two commonalities they all shared were that they were originally sea creatures and that they were monsters. That was why any flying marine animals were all categorized as skyfish.

The emergency situation before our eyes was a gargantuan skyfish latching onto an airship similar to its size. There was a cloud of red smoke billowing from the captured airship—most likely an SOS.

The skyfish with translucent skin and white body had wrapped its many large, thick tentacles around the airship, latching on tight to prevent its escape. Was it trying to catch its prey or had it viewed the airship as its enemy? I wasn't sure, but it didn't look like the airship had any hope of escaping the creature's grasp unassisted. It appeared to be inoperable, at a stop just like we were.

Still, that was one big skyfish. A half-hearted attack on that thing likely would have no effect at all. To think this was a squid... I'd seen and eaten small ones but not one *that* big. It looked like quite the threat from where I was standing.

"Would it sell for a lot?" I couldn't help but ask.

"What? Uh...I'm not sure. I'd think if it's that big, then the manastone inside it's gotta be massive. Surely that would be valuable?"

If it was worth money, that meant it was worth taking down. The airship being attacked still retained its shape, so there had to be survivors on board. Having nowhere to run being so high up in the air, they'd likely retreated to their cabins. If any of the crew had tried to retaliate, well...I didn't have high hopes they'd survived.

I'd probably get some reward money for saving them, and it seemed I could look forward to the size of its manastone, so there was some good cash to be made out of this.

"Attention all crew. Attention all crew."

While I'd been thinking to myself, the voice pipe that had woken me up from my nap rang out once more.

"Due to our vessel's lack of weaponry, we will put the nearby airship's distress signal on hold while we travel to Vanderouge as swiftly as possible to request assistance."

They were making the decision to temporarily leave the ship? It wasn't a bad choice, at least. If they rushed into battle without the weapons to battle the skyfish, we would all end up dying in vain. It was neither courageous nor heroic to challenge someone to a battle you knew full well you couldn't win; it would be considered nothing more than the death wish of an impulsive daredevil. Taking a senseless risk would do nothing but decrease the chance of survival—for everyone on both of our ships. It would only increase the number of victims.

Such recklessness should be left to the meathead martial arts maniacs.

"We will now begin to accelerate. Everyone on board, please find something to hold on to, or brace on the floor. Three..."

No, waaaaaaaait!

The moment the countdown for that big turbo boost started, I frantically dashed to the front of the airship.

"Please wait! Can you hear me?!" I'd made it to the bow of the ship where the helmsman should've been. I tried to open the door, but it was locked, so I banged on the door instead.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

I made it! The countdown stopped, and I could hear the door being unlocked. When the door opened, Tork's face was the one to greet me.

"Lily?"

Lynokis also peeked her head out from behind him. So this is where you were. Perfect.

"Master, apparently that skysquid can sell for a lot. We'll likely get a reward for helping out as well, so let's kill it."

"Huh? Kill the skysquid? You, Young Mi—Lily? Or, uh, me?"

I understood that feeling of hesitation well. It was entirely normal to think there was no way in hell you could take down something as large as an airship if you never had before. If you had chi in your arsenal though, they were surprisingly easy to take down. In fact, the bigger, heavier, and stronger your foe was, the more you could let loose and the more fun the battle.

That said, if Lynokis didn't want to, I couldn't force her.

"Ah, I know what you want to say. There's no need for you to bother yourself with such small fry, Master. Allow me to take it down instead."

"Wait, wait! Please wait! Ah, if you could wait too, please, I'll be done here in a moment!" Lynokis pushed past Tork, grabbed my hand, and pulled me over to the side, making sure to tell the man to wait a moment as she did so.

"Young Mistress, what are you *thinking*? There's no way you can take that down," she frantically whispered.

"Why do you think I can't?" I asked, also in a whisper.

"Didn't you see how big it is?!"

"Yes. Something that size would be surprisingly easy to take down."

"You can't! Don't talk about it like a slightly bigger cake coming out for

dessert!"

You know, now that she'd said that, that was exactly what it felt like.

"If you're really against it, why don't you remain behind, Master? Your student shall clear out the trash."

"What about that is simple trash?! It's a behemoth that can consume an airship whole!"

You're being really annoying about this, Lynokis... We were in an emergency situation where every second counted—people's lives were at stake.

"What are you going to do then?" I was getting tired of being all secretive, so I chose to face her directly and ask at a normal volume. "I don't intend to go off on my own again, not after what happened with the Umbral Arena. You can choose from one of these three options: I force you to surrender and let me go off on my own, you come with me, or you let me go without complaint."

"You're horrible, Young Mistress... You're saying I have no choice."

Now whatever could she mean?

"It's times like this that a martial artist must wield her skills. What are you even training for? What's the point in it all if you won't stand up in times of emergency?" I asked, standing firm.

"I'm training to be able to protect *you*! As *your* bodyguard! I am a bodyguard, Young Mistress! I didn't get stronger to rush into danger!"

Now that she mentioned it...she *had* said that was why she wanted to train under me.

"If you want to be my bodyguard, then you need to become strong enough to take something like that down with just a left hook and a single kick. I could beat that thing without even raising a finger."

"Being able to do that isn't normal!"

What? Lynokis was literally standing at the entrance to the realm of the abnormal... *Ah, crap, this really isn't the time to be messing around.*

"We don't have time to be standing around talking. People's lives are on the

line, so give me your answer with that in mind. What are you going to do? Are you going to come with me? Are you going to stay here?"

"Ugh, fine, I'll go..."

Good, we got that sorted out. This wasn't when I'd expected it to happen, but it was finally time for my first true battle in this life. I was starting to get pumped up!

"You're going to go out there?! Seriously?!" Tork exclaimed.

"Yes. Though if I injure myself or even die, I know that Lily would be so devastated she wouldn't want to live anymore. I'd rather avoid a hunt that could put my life at risk in such a way, but...this time, I will prioritize the lives of the people." Lynokis looked so dignified now it was hard to believe she had been begging me not to go just a few moments ago. She was standing unnecessarily straight and proper.

"But the monster is so large! Can you truly defeat it?! Surely that monster is too much for one person!"

"It will certainly be difficult, but I have confidence I can win."

And, well, after that conversation between Lynokis and Tork, which quite frankly would have been comical to a regular passerby, Tork and the middle-aged man who captained the airship agreed to let Lynokis deal with the monster.

"I'll deal with any necessary negotiations after the fact; just ask them to stop the distress signal when you're done. Once we know it's safe, we'll bring the airship over," Tork reassured us.

Anyone could tell this was an emergency, but hunting monsters or boarding other people's vessels without permission, or even damaging their possessions in the cross fire, meant we would be liable for damages, regardless of the situation. I didn't think it was the time to be worrying about such things, but I understood the requirement for such laws, so I wouldn't argue. With the other airship in its current state, there was no time to go around asking for permission. That was why Tork offered to deal with all such negotiations. I was

very grateful to have his full support.

"Rest assured, we'll negotiate any damages with Vanderouge and the Airship Guild."

How reliable. Tork wasn't a merchant of one of the most renowned trade associations in Altoire for nothing. Incidentally, we apparently were already within the borders of Vanderouge, just on the very edge of it.

"They've said they're ready," the captain informed us. "Please make your way to the stern on the lower level."

Lynokis and I did as we were told, going down to the floor we'd originally boarded the ship on.

"We've prepared a spare vessel, ma'am!" the waiting crew member said, guiding us straight to the area where a single small airship was docked.

Was this the cargo bay? There wasn't much in the way of luggage, but there were several skiffs lined up within it. Most were securely held down with belts and clamps, but there was one that was slightly floating. That was the ship that they'd prepared for us, waiting to be boarded.

Skiffs were ultra-compact airships made for small numbers of people, oftentimes a single person. Strictly speaking, they weren't particularly made for interisland travel; they were intended for use on land. They were probably kept here either as lifeboats or for short external maintenance periods. Because they were so small, they had a limited loading capacity, and the way they were structured made it difficult to windproof them, so flying at extremely high altitudes in these airships for the purposes of crossing between islands was not recommended.

They were shaped a little like legless horses. We had one at the Liston Estate that my parents used to travel to the port every day for work, but it was a different shape from these ones. I'd more often ridden on the slightly larger carriage-or box-shaped skiffs, never one of these.

That said, they were undoubtedly the simplest form of short-distance travel, but since they were surprisingly fast, it was illegal to ride them in towns in the interest of health and safety. At least, that was how it worked in Altoire—other

countries could've had different rules. But that was why it was rare to see them in the city, and many people still preferred to use a horse and carriage for transport. Even Hildetaura commuted to school on a carriage.

For distances where it wasn't worth arranging an airship but was a bit of a pain to walk on foot, these skiffs were perfect.

Lynokis— No, the talented adventurer Leeno gallantly stepped aboard the ship. The crew who had so swiftly worked together to prepare the vessel was looking at us with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. They were probably worried for the adventurer about to dash off to take down the behemoth.

Sorry for getting your hopes up, but the one taking down that monster will be me.

I hopped on behind Lynokis.

"Hold on tighter! Wrap your arms around and squeeze tight!"

"Are you ready?! Opening the rear entrance! Three, two, one—"

Once I promised I would grip onto Lynokis as tight as humanly possible, the crew gave the order to open the hull, and the skiff with us on board was thrown out of the high-speed liner and sucked into the sky.

The wind was both strong and cold. The winter air—which we had been completely shielded from inside the airship—hit us all at once, and I couldn't afford to even make jokes as I gripped tightly onto Lynokis. The wind was stronger than I could have ever imagined, strong enough that I felt like I really might get blown away. Also, it really was cold.

"I'm going to head in, Young Mistress!" Lynokis took control of the skiff as it floated down like a withered leaf and soared through the skies. The high-speed liner stayed out of range of the skysquid's tentacles so as to not get wrapped up in it themselves—though given the size of the monster, even that was quite the distance. Thanks to the speed of the skiff, it didn't take too long to reach the other ship, regardless.

The skysquid moved. Its white body made its black eyes stand out all the more. Those eyes—which looked as big as I was tall—had most definitely spotted us flying towards it. It knew we were here.

Lynokis came to a stop once we were fairly close. "What should we do, Young Mistress?" The skysquid was still looking at us, so she probably thought if we charged in without a plan, we'd be slapped down with its tentacles.

That was no worry while I was here though.

"Continue onto the deck of the... Hm?"

What is that? There was the airship, the skysquid wrapped around it, and then several ropes hanging down between them, with people at the ends of them. Ah, I see now. They were members of the crew hanging from lifelines. They must have attempted to fight off the skysquid but had been thrown off the ship instead. That or they'd thrown themselves off to avoid being eaten by the squid.

Smart move—having lifelines was definitely for the best. We were so high up that even falling to the ocean beneath you wouldn't let you come out unscathed.

Anyway, for now, I'd pass on the idea of ripping the skysquid off along with the exterior of the ship. The people hanging off might very well end up falling too. Though that would likely be the result if the squid started going berserk as well.

All right, I've got a plan. Let's take it down as quickly as possible. We'd get its attention, then deal the killing blow before it could do any more damage. Since it was my first monster hunt in this life, I would have preferred to take my time and get more of my battle sense back, but the current situation didn't allow for that.

"Charge right on in! I'll stop the tentacles!"

"Yes, Young Mistress! But those aren't tentacles, they're its legs!"

Wait, really?

"I'm going to accelerate!"

Lynokis unfalteringly charged right into the skysquid's line of sight; she was headed for the deck we could see peeking out between its legs and body.

But the moment she did that, the skysquid's body began to undulate. The

giant body of the monster moved like the waves of the sea, rising and receding. It peeled off one of its tentacles—I mean, its legs, lifted it up high, and then swung it down towards us. Its movements were slow, not swift, but its legs were extremely thick and long, which made them difficult to dodge. What was more, Lynokis was charging straight ahead, making no attempt to avoid the attack, as I had ordered her to.

We would no doubt be hit like this.

"Here we go." I grabbed Lynokis's shoulders, stood up in the back of the skiff, laid a hand on the heavy, flexible leg of the squid that was coming down towards us, and swept it to the side as if I were hitting the air.

Bang!

As soon as I touched it, the leg exploded. I couldn't help but click my tongue.

It's nowhere near as strong as it looks. What an utter disappointment.

After diverting all of the skysquid's attacks, I jumped off the skiff as it neared the deck. Lynokis brought the skiff to a forced stop by bumping it against the railing of the airship and disembarked herself shortly after me.

The skysquid, meanwhile, had clearly identified me as an enemy and was staring right at me as it twisted its body. *No intentions of escaping, hm?*

Not that I planned to let it escape, but if it seemed like it was going to retreat, I wasn't against turning a blind eye. What was most important was the airship and the lives of the people onboard. A part of me had thought that my usage of Chi Fist: Bursting Flow might have shown the skysquid the vast difference in our strength and scared it off. If it learned that attacking a ship meant it would get hurt, then it shouldn't attack any more ships in the future. Probably.

The skysquid was weaker than I'd expected it would be, and that fact had completely killed any motivation I'd had to take it down. I'd rather not force myself to fight it.

Apparently though, it had the opposite effect on the squid itself. It was now very mad at having its leg blown off.

"Young Mi— Lily! What should I do?!"

Good, right to attention.

"Hurry and rescue the people hanging over the edge! I'll deal with the squid, so don't pay it any mind! Once you've rescued the people, tie the lifelines to yourself!" The skysquid saw me as its enemy, so with any luck, all its attacks would be focused on me. If it started flailing too wildly, it would damage the ship and put the dangling people at risk. For now, I needed to distract it and limit its movements. After that, I'd kill it. Swiftly.

"Understood!" Lynokis shouted back.

As I'd thought, there was no one on the deck, so surely no one would complain if I went a little wild.

"Come at me." I didn't think my words would be understood, but maybe it would at least get the idea I was deliberately provoking it.

The skysquid raised two of its large legs. Three more approached me from behind. One grabbed a large crate—probably some of the ship's cargo—and lifted it into the air. *I guess it can use its head a little for battle tactics, even if it's weak.* Given it could use tools, perhaps it wasn't completely unintelligent.

Just in case...I'd make sure to catch the box. I was afraid about what was inside; the last thing I wanted was to have to pay compensation when the whole reason I was going to Vanderouge was to make money in the first place. That was fine though; it shouldn't be too hard.

But for now, it was time to play around with it until Lynokis finished rescuing the crew.

Skyfish were one of the many phenomena caused by Vikeranda breaking up the land continent into numerous floating islands. These creatures were said to be one of the evolutionary forms of sea life—literally fish flying through the sky.

They were creatures we still didn't know much about, with scholars claiming on both sides that they would one day return to the sea, and that they would continue flying in the sky. It was as if the creatures had mistaken the sky as the sea and were simply swimming as they usually would.

They came in all shapes and sizes, and there was no uniformity in the species.

You could get unbelievably massive skyfish like the skysquid we currently faced, while others were the size of common fish you could find on a dinner table. The Fugaku ray I'd spotted with Neal once was also a skyfish.

The most famous was a gigantic skywhale known as Moumou Lee, which was said to be the size of a large floating island. After witnessing its shadow blocking out the sun's rays, the ancients had dubbed it the Lightdevourer out of reverent fear. Such a creature had been leisurely swimming through the ocean of the sky for hundreds of years now. It was said to be far bigger and much older than the Fugaku ray, which was incredible to think about. Its majestic appearance was said to be the incarnation or messenger of the gods, apparently even becoming an object of worship in some parts of the world.

Moumou Lee was still alive and well, swimming through the skies all over the world. Apparently, you could see it once every few decades, no matter where you were. I vaguely felt as if I had seen it in my previous life, but I had yet to witness it in this one.

Sometimes I would dodge the skysquid's attacks; other times I would block. I used one hand to defend against any strikes that would have hit the ship to put as little strain on the vessel as possible. Everything was going smoothly. The only real damage was that its mucus was making its body all sticky and slimy and smelled pretty rancid. That wasn't much of a hiccup, though.

Sometimes I would pick up some nearby objects and throw them at its big black eyes to catch its attention. Though I couldn't see any emotion in them, I could almost *feel* anger and frustration building. Faced with prey it couldn't catch—and that was in fact even deliberately taunting it—it refused to look away from me.

Exactly how I want.

I was the decoy. While I grabbed its attention, Lynokis would have the freedom to rescue the crew members and discreetly evacuate them into the cabins.

"Lily! I'm finished over here!"

Done rescuing the crew, hm? Then it was time for our little game to come to

an end.

"Tie a lifeline to any heavy pole that could be used like a spear!"

"Huh? Uh, okay!"

I wasn't sure if my intentions had been conveyed properly, but Lynokis began moving as I said, regardless. While she did that, now that I no longer had to hold back, I began blowing up the skysquid's legs using Bursting Flow without reserve. Its limbs became shorter and shorter with each shock wave.

"Creeeee!"

I couldn't tell if that was the sound of the skysquid's cries or the sound of the airship creaking, but the squid's eyes started to waver as each leg that touched me exploded into pieces, an inexplicable sight indeed.

It was undeniable now—there had been a clear shift of its emotions from hesitation to awe.

"No." When I saw it was about to make its escape, I jumped up above its head. "I won't let you run." If it wanted to run, it should've done it at the start of this whole mess; I'd have been willing to let it go back then.

But I would give it no more chances. I was now in a situation where it was okay for me to let loose a bit—I'd end this in one strike.

Temper the internal chi in my legs, and then fill them with heavy chi. This monster was much weaker than it looked, so there was no need for any Techniques. If I hit it too hard, its manastone might shatter completely, and I would be unable to sell its carcass for much. It was important I retained its original shape as much as possible.

All I had to do was kick it into the deck; it wouldn't do much damage to such a soft body. After a short moment of floating in the air, I began my sudden descent and fired my leg into the skysquid's resilient head, slamming it into the deck.

"Stab it!"

As I floated in the air after that kick—even before I had shouted at her— Lynokis was already thrusting the metal rod with the lifeline tied to it deep into the squid's eye.

All right, that should do it.

But...it had all been so boring. It was far too lackluster for my first real battle in this life. I wanted to make sure I fought something a little stronger next time.

The skysquid thrashed around a little upon being stabbed, but when I followed up with an additional stab, it stopped moving. It seemed we had been right to have a spear restrain its movements first—we'd have been in trouble if it had destroyed the ship.

"See? It worked, didn't it?" For me, it had been a very disappointing monster, but it had at least made for a good experience for Lynokis. It was far too easy for me to take down something like this... Hm?

"Are you not way too strong, Young Mistress?" Lynokis muttered as she stared down at me.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, you're only saying that NOW?!

"You're underestimating me far too much. Listen up, I'm ten times—no, hundreds of times stronger than you seem to think I am."

A master always wanted their student to think they were amazing. Respect me. Look at me with eyes of respect. Respect, I tell you!

"Ah ha ha, come now, Young Mistress, you're exaggerating. You're so childishly vain sometimes."

She just... She just gave me a mocking smile and brushed off what I said! What an infuriating student!

"Well, those parts of you are also what make you cute. Not that you aren't cute anyway."

What was with that addition? God, she pissed me off. In fact, had she not been watching me? Had she not seen me fight? I'd done a ton of things that I hadn't even taught her. Did that not interest her? What? She was so busy with the rescue that she hadn't even been looking? I see. Okay then. Well, that was fine.

That! Was totally fine!

All six of the crew members who had been hanging from the ship survived the attack, though some had sustained injuries, and others had fallen ill due to being exposed to the strong winds outside the barrier of the windbreaks; we were in winter now, so they must have been absolutely freezing. Thankfully, it seemed nothing was life-threatening.

"Are you adventurers? Thank you so much for your assistance. You're very strong..."

The captain of the attacked airship had survived. As it turned out, the crew members who had been suspended in the air were escorts for the ship and had immediately evacuated everyone to their cabin the moment the skysquid attacked. Miraculously, there wasn't a single casualty, largely thanks to their efforts. The airship was still in a condition that it could remain airborne, so it certainly hadn't been impossible to keep everyone safe, at least.

The exterior of the ship was covered in scratches, but the most important machinery inside was completely unscathed. In other words, it was but a surface wound.

The airship was a regular passenger liner that traveled between islands carrying citizens and their luggage. Per their emergency procedure, passengers were still being told to remain in their cabins, but there would no doubt be a massive commotion when it came time to disembark and they saw the remains of a giant skysquid lying on the deck.

They were truly fortunate we'd stumbled upon them when we had; we'd caught them not long after the skysquid's initial attack. If we had taken any longer, they would have almost certainly crash-landed. Since they were in the sky, there was nowhere for them to escape to, and since the squid had been so tightly wrapped around the vessel, it would have been impossible to dispatch the skiffs or small passenger ships to evacuate everyone. In such a hopeless situation, they'd likely felt nothing but despair.

They had raised the distress signal with the tiniest hope that someone would save them. Apparently, the captain and the crew had been watching from the windows as our airship came to a stop nearby and the skiff with me and Lynokis aboard flew towards them.

Did you see the fight...? Wasn't it amazing? I won't say who it was specifically, but they were amazing, right? Super-duper amazing? You...couldn't see? You can't see the deck from the cabins? I see. Well, it wasn't anything special anyway.

"I'm glad both the ship and the people on board are safe." Leeno was basking in the admiring gazes of the crew amazed at her feat. I could see the tiniest bit of pride on her face.

I was a little unhappy about her taking all the credit, but who would really believe that a seven-year-old girl had taken down a massive skyfish? Saying Lynokis had defeated it made far more sense, so I had to accept that this would happen. Besides, an event like this only spread the name of Leeno the adventurer further. One of the main purposes of us going to Vanderouge was to do just that, so I would accept these circumstances.

Incidentally, Nia Liston's birthday had passed at the end of fall, and now we were at the start of winter, so I was already seven years old. The months went by so quickly.

Now that the smoke signal had been stopped, the high-speed liner slowly moved towards us. I decided to return to the airship early, leaving Lynokis and Tork—who said he would take charge of the negotiations—to finish what they needed to do. I wanted to clean the slimy, fishy smell from my body as soon as possible. No one was paying attention to me anyway and I had no reason to hang around. Leeno was the only one of us that had to remain.

May as well go back to my nap.

I would've loved it if there were a bath, but I highly doubted there was...

I returned to the ship just as the captain and Tork made their way to the other one. As I'd thought, since this was an airship built for speed, there was no bath, so I asked the few female crew members on board if they could prepare some hot water and help me wipe down my body.

"Ew, she's so slimy."

"What is this?"

"Ugh, I'm really bad with stuff like this."

"It feels a little inappropriate, doesn't it?"

There were a few questionable reactions, but if I paid too much attention to them, they would bother me to no end, so I simply chose to ignore them.

While I was being wiped down, they asked me about Leeno's battle with the skysquid, but given I couldn't tell them even a fraction of the truth, I simply said, "It was over before I knew it." A little bit of the stink remained even after they were done, but there was a limit to how much I could clean off without a full bath, so I decided to give up on it.

Until Lynokis and Tork finished with the negotiations, we wouldn't be going anywhere, so I decided to go rest as I had planned.

With no disturbances, I was able to rest until evening as I had originally intended. There was a large shake at one point, but it was most likely the ship speeding up. I at least felt well rested when I woke. Had the exhaustion from the twenty-six recordings left me now? The skysquid was not such a challenging opponent it could tire me out, so I hadn't needed to recover from that.

I looked out the window from which a soft red light filtered through; I could see that we were moving. We were going so fast we'd easily overtake any migratory birds we passed by.

I think that's enough sleep for now. Maybe I should check on how things are going.

I left my room and asked one of the crew passing by if they had seen Tork or Leeno. Apparently, they were having tea in the dining area together. When I peeked in, they were both still there. I had no idea what they were talking about, but it seemed like it was fine for a child to interrupt. If I joined the conversation and then discovered I was in the way, I could simply dismiss myself.

"Did you finish with the negotiations?" I asked, sitting down in the same seat I had taken at breakfast this morning—Lynokis and Tork were also in the same seats so it seemed like the natural place to sit.

"It seems like it might take a while to finalize. Their passengers seemed a little anxious, and there's still a chance that there was internal damage to the ship they hadn't found yet, so we decided to go our separate ways for now and renegotiate at a later date," Tork explained. Unfortunately, we had to simply accept that outcome. It was true that it wasn't exactly the time or place for lengthy negotiations; they'd be best getting somewhere safe as soon as possible.

"What happened to the skysquid's manastone?"

"We took the manastone, while the passenger liner took the body," Lynokis told me.

"This airship cannot handle something of such weight, you see," Tork added.

I see. Well, I'll just hope the manastone is of good value then.

"We'll be arriving in Vanderouge soon, little miss."

Wow, this really was a fast trip.

We'd taken a bit of a detour, but we somehow still managed to arrive in Vanderouge by the evening.

The Empire of Flight, Vanderouge—this was where our short adventuring life would begin. For me, it was pretty much the same as a vacation. I would be able to spend these next dazzling, thrilling days in actual combat.

Please, just for once, let me experience a fulfilling battle to the death. I was definitely setting myself up for disappointment, but still, I couldn't help but be excited.

I was looking forward to this.

Chapter 4: Making Money

It was night by the time we arrived in Eunesgo, the capital of Vanderouge. The high-speed liner that Tork had prepared for us truly lived up to its name. I'd been told before we left that we'd reach our destination in a day, but I hadn't believed it until it happened. What an incredible ship, despite all that metal everywhere. There had been a slight delay due to the skysquid attack, but we still managed to arrive the same day.

We spent the rest of our day relaxing in the hotel as originally planned. If we'd arrived when it had been lighter out, we might've had the opportunity to take a little wander around town, but it wasn't such a big deal.

A luxury hotel room had been reserved for us because, ostensibly, we were here on invitation of the second prince of Altoire, Hiero Altoire. We had originally planned to pay for our own accommodations, but apparently the prince had always wanted to meet me, so he had paid for us. I was thankful for his kindness. However, given his background, there was no way he was going to make us stay in a cheap hotel, and so he'd chosen one of the most prestigious luxury hotels in the empire.

"Um, excuse me, young lady...?" Unfortunately, the hotel was so luxurious that we were stopped at reception—specifically because of how I smelled.

Though we'd informed the authorities for legal purposes, this visit was a secret one, so we'd decided not to use the Liston name at the hotel. To them, I was nothing more than the assistant of the adventurer Leeno.

Our current appearance was far from playing the part of the clientele of a luxury hotel—nothing about us looked aristocratic. Since we'd been booked under the prince's name, the experienced receptionist wasn't averse to our presence, but it seemed the smell was too much.

"We ended up in a fight with a skysquid on the way here," Leeno explained. "She did end up touching it, so the smell must have gotten onto her."

"I'm terribly sorry, but our establishment cannot permit you entry before you bathe and acquire a change of clothes..." he said, truly looking guilty. I wasn't sure if he actually believed Leeno's explanation. To put what he was trying to say bluntly, he didn't care about the reason; he just needed us to do something about the smell. It seemed like a reasonable response to me. The fact they hadn't immediately kicked us out was its own kindness.

Honestly...I was getting a bit self-conscious, thinking that those around us could smell the horrible fish stink. I'd gotten so used to it that I couldn't smell it anymore.

"We have a change of clothes, so could we possibly have a bath arranged here?" Lynokis asked.

"Of course." The receptionist nodded and rang the bell to call for a female employee. "Please guide her to the baths, if you would."

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"Yes, sir."

I should follow her then?

"Ah, let me go with— Oof!"
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I had a feeling she was going to say such nonsense, so I was glad I was prepared. The moment she started suggesting it, I shut her up with a slap to the thigh.

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"I want you to go ahead to the room. Understand?"

"Yes, Young Mistress..."
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For goodness' sake, don't embarrass me even while we're abroad.

"Where did you come from, young miss?"

"From the Kingdom of Altoire. I arrived not long ago."

After I was taken to the large employee bathroom, the staff member seemed to have decided I was too young to be left unattended, so she stayed and chatted with me while I washed my hair and body twice, then slowly soaked myself in the water—I truly felt refreshed after. I had been able to get most of the sliminess off in the airship, but it had been impossible to completely get the

grime off without the proper facilities, especially the gunk in my hair. With this, the mysterious mucus was completely washed off along with the smell.

I got changed into my spare clothes and asked if my old clothes could be put in the wash. Upon returning to the lobby, the receptionist gave me a once-over and then finally let me through to my hotel room.

Aristocrats were referred to as nobles in Vanderouge, and their rooms were designed so they could stay with their servants. Grade of the room aside, it was basically the same setup as the dorms back at Altoire Academy.

"This outfit really feels much more natural on me." Lynokis—who had been waiting in the room—had changed into her attendant's attire and had already set everything up to ensure she could pour me a cup of tea when I arrived.

"You got changed even though we're about to go for dinner?"

"But of course. I don't need to wear such troublesome adventuring gear while in the hotel."

There was a very different level of hassle between wearing regular clothes and wearing gear for adventuring.

I took my time having a cup of tea while we confirmed our schedule.

"We will be leaving for the islands tomorrow morning," Lynokis said.

"Mm-hm."

There were limited days left in our winter vacation, so we wouldn't be able to extend our time here. We needed to follow the schedule as closely as possible and waste little time. Our goal for this trip was three hundred million krams, one hundred million at the minimum.

"Cedony Trading will handle all of the logistics such as the airship transport to the hunting locations. All we have to do is go to the docks and hunt monsters. Cedony will also deal with the trading of the materials we acquire."

"They're really doing a lot for us, aren't they?"

"It's their job, after all. We've already paid so there's no need to worry about it."

I still thought we were being treated exceptionally well. The fact that they had arranged an express liner was only proof of how hard they were working to make our adventure as smooth as possible. Honestly, I wasn't a massive fan of working up a tab with a merchant—if we were going to be indebted to them, I'd prefer only a small debt to repay... Though perhaps that was an outdated way of thinking.

"When do we meet with Prince Hiero?" I asked.

"I gave the date and time of our arrival, but his schedule is still undecided, it seems. I believe we will have to wait for contact from them."

It was still undecided, hm? Honestly, it would be a bit of a nuisance to have him interrupt our schedule, but...not a lot I could do about that. His visit to Vanderouge was related to magivision, so I couldn't say it was unrelated to me. Meeting with him was to be treated as an absolute priority.

And yet...something still made me feel uneasy.

"I'm starting to get the feeling that something unexpected is going to happen with the prince."

"Young Mistress, you're going to jinx it."

Was this the old wives' tale that said anything you said would come true?

Hm... Perhaps that would be the case. Preferably, we would meet with the prince and then part ways soon after, just as we'd planned, but whether because I said them out loud or not, my hunches often came true.

The capital of Vanderouge, Eunesgo, was also a floating island. It was pretty big as far as floating islands went, but as the capital city of a country, it was on the smaller side. The capital of Altoire was built upon one of the continents still attached to the sea, but from the perspective of the rest of the world, we were actually unusual.

It wasn't the widest-reaching country in the world, but ignoring the size, Vanderouge possessed more floating islands than Altoire. In fact, that was the most likely reason their flight technology was so advanced. Not only was the capital city a floating island, but they also had numerous other floating islands

within their borders, and that meant they needed an efficient way to connect the people and allow them to travel from island to island. There were as many settlements as there were floating islands, and for each settlement, there was another set of rules and ideologies. Apparently in the past, quarrels and other sorts of conflicts between the islands had been the norm.

In order to bring everyone together, a method of smooth communication was essential. As such, their flight technology had grown into the most unparalleled airship technology in the world. They had gone from previously being unable to communicate efficiently between floating islands—even ones within the same borders—to having some of the best and simplest airships that were naturally integrated into the citizens' lives.

At least, that's what they'd said in class.

The most important thing in terms of our goals for this trip was that, regardless of size, Vanderouge had many floating islands. As a result of adapting to the rapid environmental changes caused by the Great Float, each individual island had ended up with a unique ecosystem. In the most extreme cases, incredibly valuable medicinal herbs and ores could be found in the wild on a floating island that was directly next to yours, and the appearances of animals you knew well could look so different over there that you barely recognized them. It wasn't unusual for there to be such drastic differences between islands.

The reason I'd chosen Vanderouge for this adventure wasn't because they had a lot of unexplored islands. Rather, it was the complete opposite; it was because the details of the floating islands were well-documented. The level of detail obtained by each scout could vary, but there were as many ecosystems as there were floating islands, and a limited number of monsters within those ecosystems.

What kind of monsters could you find where? What kinds of dungeons could be found on which islands? If you knew that information, you could efficiently search for monsters within each individual island, hunt those monsters, and make money. Simple.

After spending the night at the hotel, I took a bath—this time in our own room—early the next morning and then got myself ready to head out. The magic hair dye would last several days, so I didn't have to top it up yet.

We headed to the hotel's restaurant while it was still dark. Unsurprisingly, there were no other guests at such an early hour. Even the chefs were still in the middle of setting up. We tried our luck and asked one of the chefs if they could make something simple for us, then discussed our plans for the day while we ate.

"First, we hunt the sword deer, right?" Leeno—not Lynokis—asked.

I, her student Lily, nodded. "Mr. Tork has requested we hunt three at minimum. He'll pay the most if the antlers are not broken and the pelts left in good condition. If possible, he also wants them with their manastones still intact, as well."

Due to all the preparations that Cedony had to put in, from the procurement of the express liner to the complete support on the field to the negotiations concerning the skysquid attack, Tork had placed in quite a number of requests to compensate. According to Lynokis, he'd been quite brazen with his demands, despite the reserved look on his face.

Well, it wasn't as if we would be working for free, so I'd try to fulfill as many of his orders as possible. If he was going to buy them from us at a fair price, then that was perfect. We weren't merchants, and if we were unreasonably greedy, we'd have our feet swept out from right under us. Rather than have that happen, it would be much more efficient if we saved the time and effort of selling our hunts by ourselves. If the one doing the transaction was someone we trusted, then all the better.

"Cedony have been fairly cooperating with us, haven't they? If we're happy with their work, then we should agree to as many of their requests as we deem reasonable," I said.

"Well, if you're okay with it."

"Are you saying you're not?"

"If there's someone who would buy the monsters off of us for more, I'd much

rather sell to them. If I'm fighting with my life on the line, I'd rather have our spoils sell for more."

I see. Well, I could understand where she was coming from.

"Master," I replied. "Money is important, but it's very clear what we have to do to raise it, right? Meanwhile, trust is very different. There is no sure way to cultivate it or nurture it. If you lose one's trust too thoroughly, you may never be able to get it back. If you intend to be dishonest with Cedony, then you should cut them off completely."

"I won't. I was just thinking it would be nice."

Good. That was fine then. I'd tried to implicitly include the meaning of "You should think a little more about my trust in you, as well," but it hadn't gotten across to her whatsoever...

From her always saying that she wanted to co-sleep with me, to her saying that she wanted to bathe together, to her viewing Sanowil back at the academy as an enemy, I had no idea what was wrong with her. She never stopped acting suspicious—and she didn't even understand her master's true strength. A teacher always wanted to be thought of as amazing by their students; they wanted to be respected. Did she understand that? She was innocently chomping away on carrots, looking very much like she didn't.

After that breakfast where just a glimpse of dissatisfaction could be seen, the receptionist from yesterday saw us off as we headed to the port and boarded the airship that Cedony had arranged for us.

From the arrangement of the airship, to preparing a captain who knew all about Vanderouge, to the crew who were built enough they probably carried cargo for a living, to the application to the adventurer's guild to allow for our activities in the country and the provision of any necessary supplies...all of it had been arranged with Cedony's support.

I really was thankful. All Lynokis and I had to do was go to the islands and hunt—we didn't have to worry about anything else. They'd taken such good care of us that it honestly felt unreasonable to ask for a higher cut of the monster sales.

That's enough of that for now though. My fun, enjoyable days of hunting down monsters without reserve, of freely swinging my fists around every day were about to begin. I was so excited. I won't ask for too much—just give me a monster stronger than that skysquid!

Now off to where the fun awaited!

"Will they really be okay?"

Bande had received the answer to that question yesterday.

"I hear she's quite renowned in Altoire." Though that had been his response to Jude—his longtime crew member—Bande, the captain of the ship, admittedly held the same doubts. Yesterday, the young master of Cedony Trading had warned them to not show any disrespect because there would be an incredibly skilled adventurer coming with them.

But then the adventurers who came on board were...

"One's a young woman not even my daughter's age, and the other's a literal kid."

Jude's words were exactly what the captain had thought too.

"All right, enough with the gossip and get back to work." Bande chased away the understandably worried Jude and returned to the wheel. The ship had already set sail—it wouldn't be long before they reached their destination.

One's a young woman not even my daughter's age, and the other's a literal kid.

Bande was well aware of that. His job was to bring the girls to the floating islands where the monsters lived. The next president of Cedony Trading, Tork Cedony, had unmistakably directly ordered him to do so. There were no misunderstandings, no mistakes; this was his job.

Those girls were going to the floating islands to hunt monsters. In other words, they were going to a dangerous place to take down dangerous creatures —those two young girls.

Of course he wasn't without worry or anxiety. What Jude felt was also what

Bande felt, and no doubt the rest of the crew, as well. However, there was no mistake that this airship's duty for the day was to ferry those girls to their destination. Even if they were younger than his son or his grandchildren, bringing them to that dangerous island was their job. It wasn't time for him to be complaining about how reluctant he was to do it—he was hired to do this, and so he would.

The morning Vanderouge sky was as dark as always. It was the same as always, but the heavy feelings he was left with made everything look so much darker, despite the fact a day trip was such a rare and easy job.

But when they arrived at the island, their fears and worries were immediately chased away.

The first island they visited was more commonly known as Autumn Island. Due to the effects of the Great Float, winter never arrived on the island. Or to be more precise, the temperature differences between the seasons had gotten all messed up. Summer would pass, fall would come, and then the temperature and climate would remain the same as it moved into winter. The temperature did drop by midwinter, but never so low that there was any ice.

Autumn Island was rich in vegetation and was therefore home to many herbivores, but it wasn't home to many people. Any attempts at agriculture were always quickly ravaged by the monsters, so the island had been established relying on the monsters as their primary resource. The island was left as natural as it could be while hunters and adventurers would come to hunt the monsters.

The girls' goal here was the sword deer. These were deer monsters known for their aggressive temperament, troubling carnivores, hunters, and adventurers alike.

As their name suggested, sword deer had antlers as sharp as a sword's edge, which they would swing around and stab into their enemies. They had a timid side akin to that of a regular deer, running swiftly away the moment they were detected, only charging towards the person if the situation called for it. When they reached maturity, they were twice as big as your average deer—if they

were to tackle a person directly, the victim wouldn't get out without a notable injury. What was worse, their antlers were like weapons in their own right; if they were to impale you, you'd be dead then and there. They were also generally found in herds.

For a novice hunter, they could be a difficult monster to go after.

"This island is very pleasantly warm, Master."

"Indeed. I suppose they do call it Autumn Island for a reason."

With just a short walk from the harbor—which was a settlement of around two hundred people—you'd find yourself in the forest rather quickly. On the road leading to that forest stood the woman who looked like a fresh-faced adventurer, and the child no older than ten by her side.

"We're going to head off now. We won't take long, so please be prepared to depart," the adventurer turned and told Bande, running off into the forest without waiting for a response.

Make preparations to depart? The crew was out here worrying if the two would even come back safely, and yet those girls were already thinking of their next step. The adventurer exuded the vibe of being new to the job, and she didn't even look that strong. Hell, she was bringing a *child* with her.

There were many reasons that Bande's face twisted unhappily, yet he turned around and called out to his crew, "We're heading out shortly! Get ready to depart!"

This was his job. No matter how worried or anxious he might be, his job for the day was to be their wings. If he was ordered to fly somewhere, then he would do just that.

"Hey, Captain, are they really gonna be okay?!"

"Like hell if I know! Shut up and get ready!"

Bande felt exactly what Jude did—of course he did!

But then, while they were preparing to depart...

"Captain! Could we have a skiff, please?" That novice adventurer came dashing out of the forest carrying a massive burlap sack, even though she had

literally just entered it moments before, and even though Bande was still in the middle of confirming their next destination.

"Huh...? What? A skiff?"

"To carry our spoils. Could you please carry the deer we've hunted?"

"Excuse me?"

Bande stood there, still unable to comprehend the words spoken to him as the adventurer dropped the bag in front of him.

"These are some dragonheads. They attacked us so I killed them too. We can sell them, can't we?"

"Um... Ah, yes."

A skilled adventurer. This young lady *was* a skilled adventurer. Comparing this sight with what information he had been given beforehand...it had been completely true.

"Jude! Get the cargo skiff out!" Bande shouted. Jude stopped whatever work he was doing and looked confused as he deployed the skiff and went with the adventurer into the forest. Once they were gone, Bande looked inside the bag that had been dumped at his feet.

As the adventurer had said, there were in fact the carcasses of several dragonheads inside.

Dragonheads were huge rats with manes. They were named as such because their silhouettes looked like dragons' heads. Normally, they would only feed on plants, but they were ferocious little things and would attack even creatures bigger than them if they were starving. Even for adults, they were dangerous monsters to face if one didn't know how to fight.

Well, even a novice adventurer should be able to hunt this many of those pests.

"Hm...?" He realized he couldn't smell any blood. There was the distinctive odor of a beast but no blood. Out of curiosity, he pulled one of the dragonheads out of the bag—and sure enough, there were no external injuries. The rat was definitely dead though.

"How did she manage this...?"

The adventurer had a shortsword hanging by her waist, so she must've used that to fight with, and yet there were no signs of it having been used on these rats. Bande, at least, couldn't see any kind of injury. *Did they use poison?* he thought to himself. But there was no pungent smell indicative of poison, so it probably wasn't that either.

"Damn... We really may have stumbled onto a winner here."

It was just as the young master had said. Don't be rude, because they'd be working for a very skilled adventurer. He'd been telling the truth. Bande had been judging the book by its cover and that had been his biggest mistake.

The girls were scheduled to visit several islands and take down the monsters there. Honestly, it was a crazy schedule that would be difficult even for a skilled adventurer. This was the kind of thing a mercenary corps or a famous clan would do—that was what he had been expecting.

But instead, two young girls had boarded their ship.

All of that had happened this morning, but upon seeing those rats, he understood. "Hurry up with the preparations to disembark!" Since a skilled adventurer really had come and they would be continuing according to schedule, their time on each island would most definitely be short.

As Bande carried on with his own work, Jude returned on the skiff, a number of sword deer loaded on top. The confusion hadn't left his face.

There was no confusion now: if they were going to continue according to schedule, today was going to become one hell of a busy day.

Today's results:

- Sword deer x8
- Dragonhead x16
- Assassin eagle x3
- Polar slime [huge] x1

- Snow tiger x2
- Snow arrow x7 (and eggs x4)
- Fire sea serpent [massive] x1 (plus a bunch of fish that got caught up in its struggle)
- Mythical Beast: aqua horse (We were told we'd be cursed if we hunted it, so we let it go.)
 - Illumifly x33
- Foot mushroom [huge] x1 (Manastone only. We ate its body on-site. It was delicious.)

And that marked our first day.

Time really did fly when you were having fun, and before I knew it, the sun was already starting to set. By then, the captain had told us they'd struggle to fit anything more on the airship, so we decided to call it a day. I still had plenty of energy, and I was only just starting to get my battle sense back, but I supposed I could stop for now.

The ship's deck was piled with mountains of monster carcasses. Looking at it all stacked up like that, we really had hunted a lot, but my body still felt like it was just getting warmed up. Not a single one of those monsters had put up a good fight. I'd tried to devise ways I could enjoy myself—changed my moves and methods, climbed mountains and jumped down valleys—but the monsters were fundamentally too weak.

It was like stomping on an ant as an adult—what was fun about it? Then again, I wouldn't say I *hadn't* enjoyed myself. It had still been surprisingly fun, probably because I'd finally gotten the chance to let loose without reserve, regardless of how weak the monsters were.

A world where things could be resolved with a single swing of the fist really was so much more convenient.

The one experience that genuinely had been a lot of fun was the Mythical Beast that we had been stopped from hunting, that so-called aqua horse. It was

a mysterious horse made of water. Physical attacks were completely ineffective, so it had given me the chance to use a kind of chi I didn't get to use very often; it was a valuable experience.

"Trust Master Tork to leave us with such incredible adventurers..." The captain and the crew had been overjoyed after our first hunt, and they had cheerfully flown us to the next floating island, but now their faces looked far more taut.

"Please, you're exaggerating," Lynokis calmly replied. She looked so unabashedly smug even though I had hunted the vast majority of the monsters, and she had been begging for me to stop before I made them all go extinct. I shouldn't complain though—she wasn't wrong to take credit, so it wasn't a problem. This was the perfect chance to further sell the name of Leeno the adventurer.

After that, we cooked the foot mushroom that Lynokis had rendered unsellable when she blew off its top half with Rumbling Thunder and ate it with everyone as we headed back to Eunesgo. You know...this is delicious, and it smells sublime. Would the hotel cook a proper meal for us if we brought some of it back? It already tastes this good by just grilling it; I feel like it could only taste better in the hands of a proper chef.

It was still early evening, and I personally thought it was far too early to be leaving, but they'd said we couldn't continue because no more monsters would fit on the airship. Still, calling it quits so soon really felt like we were wasting our time. I wasn't sure exactly how much money today's haul would sell for, but it seemed decent. Our plans to go for the real high-value monsters would actually begin tomorrow. Today had been more of an opportunity to feel the monsters out, since it was my first foray and all. Or, well, it would've been if we hadn't bumped into that skysquid yesterday.

But the monsters in this area weren't all that strong, so perhaps getting a feel for them hadn't been necessary. I *could've* gone straight to targeting one of the dangerous ones. Apparently, there were monsters going for tens of millions—surely they would be strong with bounties like that. It likely made them more dangerous, but that was ideal for me; I'd wanted to feel a little danger. I would pray they were as strong as I was expecting.

When we arrived at the port, Lynokis and I went straight back to the hotel. Cedony Trading would deal with all the annoying business stuff. They really did make everything so much easier for us. I appreciated all the support they were providing.

"Ah, please wait! Wait, wait, wait! Please wait!"

When we made it back to the hotel, the receptionist stopped us just as he had the previous day—likely because of how I looked. A few times, Lynokis had failed to kill some of the monsters in one shot, so they had ended up with external injuries that had sprayed me with blood—and *only* me. Lynokis really did still have a long way to go...

Oh, we have pieces of this mushroom from our hunt, by the way. Can you make anything with them?

Nia Liston was brought to be cleaned in the employees' bath again, while Lynokis cleaned up in the bath in their room.

"You're back already?"

At the same time, at Cedony Trading's Eunesgo warehouse, Tork Cedony was exchanging information and sorting out purchases when Bande, one of their airship captains and a trusted veteran of the company, came to find him.

Tork had asked him to be Leeno's wings while she was in the country. If she wanted to go somewhere, he was to take her there and abide by her wishes as much as possible. Once Leeno returned for the night, Bande was to report to him. Those had been Tork's orders to him.

According to what Leeno had said to him on the ship to Vanderouge, she never hunted overnight. While in unfamiliar territory, she would only operate during the daytime. It was a smart decision. But...

"That was fast." When he looked through the door of the dimly lit warehouse, there was still an evening glow outside. Since it was winter, days were much shorter, so they definitely had to have finished early. Or had they returned early because of some unexpected incident? Tork's mind started conjuring up all manner of worst-case scenarios and a variety of injuries Leeno could have

sustained.

"Well, you see... Something somewhat unexpected happened..."

It appeared Tork's fears were unfounded.

"Run into some hassle?"

"No... It'll be easier if you see for yourself. Are you available right now?"

"What happened?"

"Would you believe me if I told you she hunted so much we couldn't fit it all on the ship? You wouldn't, right?" Bande turned to go out whence he'd come.

He was right; Tork didn't believe it. He fully assumed he'd misheard. Whatever the reality was though, it sounded interesting—interesting enough to take a look.

"All right, I'll go with you," Tork said, quickly walking to catch up to Bande. Certainly, he was aware of Leeno's skill, but hunting so many monsters they couldn't fit them all on the airship? Surely that was an exaggeration of the truth. Regardless, it did seem like they'd had a good hunt, so he'd like to check how much they'd managed to get. Being aware of how much Leeno could make in a day was closely related to determining future schedules and profits.

And then he was standing face-to-face with it.

"You're... No way...?!"

A cloth was draped over the merchant ship docked in the port in order to hide it from view. At first glance, it was hard to tell, but as someone who knew what was kept under that fabric, Tork could tell that there was an unnatural mountain of *something* under there—and he was pretty sure it was as the captain had said, despite how preposterous it sounded.

Bande wasn't one for jokes, so Tork hadn't thought he was making it up, but he had thought he had been exaggerating. And yet, it turned out he hadn't been. It wasn't exaggeration; they really had caught more than could fit on the airship. A whole mountain of monsters—of *treasure*—had been brought back from their venture out.

"How many sword deer did they hunt?!" Tork asked as his feet sped up of

their own accord.

"Eight of them," Bande responded, frantically chasing after his boss.

Eight sword deer. Fantastic! Tork had ordered three, but he'd presented that number as a bare minimum. An obscene amount would've been an issue, but he'd more than happily buy eight from them. If he were to buy them for around five hundred thousand krams a head, process them, and sell the materials, they'd get about a one to two million kram profit.

Sword deer antlers had high artistic value due to their swordlike appearance, and depending on the quality, a deer could sell for as much as one million krams for that alone. He just had to hope he could find some in this haul with only a few scratches.

"Is there a snow tiger?!" By the time he finished jogging up the ramp, he was already out of breath; he was beginning to despise how heavy his body was getting from lack of exercise.

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"Two!"

What? Two?

"Any damage to the furs?"

"None!"
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In that case... Tork began calculating the possible value of the covered treasure before him, but before he came to an answer, he stopped short on the deck.

"Remove the cover!" he instructed a nearby crew member who was sorting the ropes.

Finally, he was able to see the mountain of treasure with his own eyes...and he could only stand there speechless. So many treasures came into view at once that he couldn't figure out what to focus on—he decided to start at the front.

First were the sword deer. These monsters were ferocious large deer with antlers as sharp as the blade of a sword. Usually, it would take several adventurers working together to set up traps to take one down. Furthermore, they were quick to escape due to their timid herbivore origins. Of course, if

adventurers were to use traps, the value of the hunted deer would often decrease due to damage to the antlers and hide.

And yet, would you look at that, all of those magnificent sword deer lined up on the deck had retained their original forms.

"How did they kill them? Poison?" They had been bled and gutted but otherwise appeared unscathed. Leeno had wielded a sword back in Altoire as well, but none of the monsters she'd hunted ever had injuries that looked as if they had been made by a blade. In fact, that was why she had been praised so highly by Cedony in the first place.

If Cedony just wanted the beasts hunted, they could ask any old adventurer. What was significant about Leeno's game was how beautifully she ended their lives—the kills were so clean that they could trust the value of the materials from her hunts.

He had never imagined the day would come when he would bear witness to such skill with his own eyes—or even to such a large pile of monsters. If they'd used poison though, the venison would no longer be edible. Sword deer tasted delicious; if the meat was in good shape, there were plenty of restaurants and nobles who would purchase it.

"She said she broke their necks, same with the snow tiger."

No way. His focused gaze began to blur. Enough of this. Let's look at the snow tiger next.

Sword deer were a hassle to deal with, but snow tigers were even worse. One alone was so strong that it could wipe out a team of a dozen veteran adventurers. Some had nicknamed them the Blizzards of Death. Snow tigers traveled with snowstorms and hunted their prey from inside the chaos of the storm. Before you could fight a snow tiger, you had to battle with the weather first. If you were unfortunate enough to bump into one, you'd be better off preparing yourself for death.

And yet Leeno had taken down a snow tiger while preserving the beautiful fur coat with nary a scratch. Could a human even manage such a feat? This would almost definitely fetch a price of over five million— *Wait!*

"What is that?!"

Tork's eyes couldn't decide what they wanted to focus on. His sight was still blurring and his excitement was off the charts. The palpitations that had been building since he climbed the ramp hadn't stopped—he hated his lack of exercise.

"They're illumiflies."

"I can see that! But they're in bottles!"

What was significant about these was that they had been caught alive. Several small bottles were lined up, each giving off a soft glow. Illumiflies were butterflies whose wings emitted light. Their biology wasn't quite understood, but since their bodies contained small manastones, they had been classified as monsters. They were rare butterflies and difficult to find.

The glowing wings of the dead butterflies would continue to emit light for a whole half a year after their death. That beautiful, ephemeral light was very popular with some collectors, and they sold for quite the price.

This was the first time Tork had seen one alive. And Leeno had caught *over thirty* of them total. How much were live butterflies worth? No... Perhaps this should be seen as a new business opportunity. If they could figure out how to breed them, they might make a whole new industry.

There were also several dragonheads and snow arrows, though they had notable injuries. Apparently, they had been hunted by the child that had accompanied Leeno, so it made sense that they weren't in as good condition, but learning that such a small girl was still plenty strong herself was its own surprise.

What especially caught Tork's eyes was the large fire sea serpent. He had placed an order for one of those as well, but it was incredibly rare to get one so big and in such pristine condition. How much would that alone sell for?

In any case, there were so many monsters and so many different *kinds* of monsters that Cedony Trading ended up asking for assistance in calculating the total profits well into the night.

Today's profits:

- 4,000,000 krams, sword deer x8
- 2,600,000 krams, dragonhead x13 (good condition)
- 50,000 krams (each), dragonhead x3 (damaged)
- 900,000 krams, assassin eagle x3
- 700,000 krams, polar slime [huge] x1 (body destroyed, manastone only)
- 4,000,000 krams (each), snow tiger x2 (exceptional quality)
 - 500,000 krams, snow arrow x5 (good condition)
 - 30,000 krams (each), snow arrow x2 (damaged)
 - 20,000 krams (each), snow arrow eggs x4
- 10,000,000 krams, fire sea serpent [massive] x1 (plus 2,000,000 kram bounty from the adventurer's guild)
- Fish caught in fight with the fire sea serpent (too many to count, set aside for now)
- 1,000,000 krams, Mythical Beast: aqua horse (only for information on its sighting)
 - 2,800,000 krams, illumifly x28 (dead)
 - 300,000 krams (each), illumifly x5 (alive)
 - 200,000 krams, foot mushroom [huge] x1 (manastone only)

In total, that made 34,490,000 krams.

Then we were on to day two of our adventuring.

"Good morning, Leeno."

We headed down to the port early again, where we met the captain and his crew already waiting. They were all the same men as the day before. When we parted ways yesterday, a lot of them had seemed a little wary after seeing how

much we'd hunted, but today, they all looked ready and raring to go.

"You won't have any problems today," the captain reassured, throwing up two fingers with his right hand. "We've prepared two ships, so we'll be able to take a lot back today."

They'd prepared two whole ships for us? That had to have been because we had hunted too many monsters to fit on the one ship yesterday. In other words, Tork was ready to earn as much money as possible without hesitation? This was him basically saying we could hunt as much as we wanted without worry?

Perfect. Then I'd make sure to meet his expectations.

"Also, we received the quote for yesterday's hunt from Tork. If you could, please take a moment to confirm it. If you agree to the price, we'll have official documents for you to sign later."

"Yes, of cour— O-Oh..." Lynokis's eyes traveled down the list, and then she saw the value at the end and couldn't help but let out her surprise. She leaned down to whisper in my ear as she showed me the documents. "Young Mistress, this is an incredible amount of money. If we continue at this rate, we might even be able to raise two hundred million krams."

Stop, I'm not interested in seeing numbers. I don't intend to look at anything resembling math unless it's my winter homework.

"I'll leave it to you. All of it. Put it away." Ugh, I really despised numbers. What the hell did they think they were? I didn't need to be able to calculate eight-digit numbers in my life. "We can deal with that kind of thing later, can't we? Can we just go already?"

Hunting was much more important right now. It wasn't like we had all the time in the world.

And so, we kept our greetings brief before boarding the airship and beginning our voyage at Leeno's command.

We had two airships, both cargo ships. The second one followed along behind us.

We could hunt a lot of monsters today, could we?

"Master." I headed for the control room where I found Lynokis and the captain standing around an aeronautical chart, discussing the day's plans. I'd had to leave many duties to her, and as Leeno, she bore the brunt of it. I did feel a little guilty shoving it all on her though...

Well, regardless.

"Since we have two ships now, it would be okay to adjust our schedule, right?"

Our hunt schedules would be adjusted based on time, weather, and load capacity. Before coming to Vanderouge, we'd put together a schedule after thinking long and hard about the most efficient route between the islands. That plan we'd made determined how many monsters we would hunt at one location before moving on to the next. This planning was a necessary task due to our limited time.

However, now we had an unexpected second ship at our disposal, so I didn't think we had to strictly go by our original schedule anymore. Our goal was one billion krams; we couldn't waste such a precious opportunity.

"We were just discussing that, actually," Lynokis told me. "This will make for a good experience; you should join us, Lily."

Oh, so I'd never had to suggest anything in the first place. I accepted Lynokis's natural invitation so I could give my own opinion with ease. I was terrible with both tedium and using my head, but this was about the enemies I would be facing on the islands—of course I'd want to join in with the discussion.

"Then going back to what we were discussing..." The captain was kind enough to recap what they had already covered, even though on the surface, I was really just someone coming to assist Leeno. I was very grateful for his consideration. "Tork has placed an additional order. There's some monsters he really wants you to hunt, and he'll pay extra for them."

The request seemed very easy to fit into our schedule at least; our hunt the day before had already covered most of Tork's previous requests. We had taken the time to get a general lay of the land yesterday, especially since it was my first hunt in this life; it had served as a nice warm-up. I'd wanted to confirm just how well I could do in this body. That skysquid had been both an unexpected

test and it had been weak. So for the first day, we'd prioritized Tork's requests.

It was just as well, because we'd decided that we'd stay on schedule starting day two, once we'd gotten the feel for things. We'd be prioritizing money from this point on, so there had been the possibility we wouldn't have the flexibility to pick up any more requests.

"The additional requests are snow tigers, fire sea serpents, bellwoods, calamity bees, blood cross crabs, and swordsman mantises... They're all infamously dangerous monsters," the captain explained.

Yup, I'd heard all those names before, and they were all monsters we'd planned to target anyway—perfect.

"What monster would you like to see, Lily?" After hearing the names of all the monsters we were to hunt, Leeno casually asked for my opinion.

"All of them. Let's go round up as many of them as possible, Master."

"Are you sure? Well, if that's what you want, then let's go for that." Our interaction made it look like a child was making an unreasonable and reckless suggestion and the teacher was simply going along with it with a smile. She looked so dependable in that moment that both the captain and the crew busying themselves around us stopped to look over at her with respect and admiration. The figure of Leeno the adventurer, overflowing with confidence—as if she were declaring that no monster could ever hope to stand against her—was the figure of not a novice adventurer but of a renowned hero.

This is it. Leeno's name is undeniably gaining power in this moment.

Still, it wasn't as if Lynokis's confidence was unfounded; it was true that no monster would stand a chance. I would be the one taking them down, after all.

We arrived at the ninety-first-lowest island by the time the morning sun had climbed up the sky and chased away the dark.

The Empire of Vanderouge's islands had all been given code numbers. Since the islands under their control were so numerous, it would be ridiculously tedious to try and give them all distinct names. Some islands had names for their towns or popular nicknames, but officially, they were only referred to by their codes. If you frequently looked at an aeronautical chart of the country, the numbers were far easier to remember. Even in the case of the first island we'd visited yesterday, "Autumn Island" was simply a nickname.

The floating islands were then split into further groupings: highest, high, middle, low, lowest. The lowest layer was close to the ocean, with some even still attached to it.

In any case, Lynokis and I took a skiff down to an island that was halfway under the sea. The airship would wait in the upper skies and then fly down to pick us up once we were done.

Now then...

"Is this that blood cross crab they were talking about? It's very big." A striking red shell stuck out on the wide beach. We'd been able to see it from afar when we were in the sky, but standing on the same beach as it, I realized now it was the size of a small mountain—not as big as the main school building, but at least as big as the dorms.

The crab's shell was a vivid red, as if bathed in fresh blood, its right pincer unnaturally larger than its left like it was showing off its favorite weapon. Its shell had a pattern that looked like a bloodstained cross. I'd heard that because it carried such a thing on its back, it brought forth a kind of religious awe from many people.

But I just see a big ol' crab.

This one crab alone would probably fill a whole ship, but that was exactly why we'd made it our first hunt. We'd load it onto one of the ships, and it would drop it off at Vanderouge, then meet back up with us. We could do that now that we had two airships at our disposal.

Incidentally, there was a bounty of 20,000,000 krams on that crab's head—it was the monster that would make us the most money from this hunt.

"They really put the craziest of prices on monsters that simply boast a big size," I remarked.

"A regular person couldn't take this down, you know," Lynokis said with a wry smile. Apparently, hundreds of people had challenged the crab and died in the

battle. In fact, the presence of the crab had completely halted any progress on the exploration of the island. A little less than a century had passed since this monster was first discovered...

And now this crab would become a part of its own bloody history.

It was a little heartless of me, but it'd already killed plenty of humans in other serious matches—this was a natural conclusion. I didn't blame the crab for its bloodshed, but we were about to have another one of those serious one-on-one matches, and as a result, he would die. It was as simple as that. I was stronger, after all.

"Would Rumbling Thunder even work on something like that?" Lynokis asked.

"Probably not. It's too big, so it would likely be ineffective. Roaring Thunder may be more appropriate."

"Gandolph's Technique, huh..." Lynokis—who viewed all of my students as her rivals—looked unhappy at that fact.

"Even an imperfect Roaring Thunder would have an effect," I told her. Chi Fist: Roaring Thunder was the Technique I had taught Gandolph. Opposite to the speed-oriented Rumbling Thunder, *Roaring* Thunder focused on sheer destructive power. That diligent man was no doubt practicing his Technique right this very second.

"Well, let's stop hanging around."

The crab still hadn't noticed our presence. Or did it simply not deem us tiny humans as worth its attention? Whichever the case, we began our approach.

"Can you win?"

"What a silly question. Didn't I just say that the only thing significant about this crab is that it's big?"

As we got closer, I could see the marks all over its shell. It detailed the history of its battles. All were scars showing how this crab had lived. I was jealous. How nice it would be to die in battle.

Dying in battle was a much better death than growing old and feeble and dying without even losing to anything. That was the death I had wished for and

ultimately never been granted.

The crab's eyes finally looked towards us. It raised its rocklike right arm as a threat...and then swung it down at a startlingly fast pace the moment I unflinchingly stepped into its attack range.

There was a heavy impact sound and a vibration that shook the whole beach, sending me flying into the air. Our eyes met.

Etch my figure upon your soul, crab. Consider it a souvenir for your next life. I doubted my intentions made it through to my enemy—it was only a crab, after all.

"Young Mistress!" Lynokis ran after me as my tumble through the air sent me a shorter distance than I'd hoped it would.

"I'm fine," I said as I made sure to land on the sand safely, stood up, and cracked my neck. It wasn't half bad. Its speed was surprising, its weight exactly as I'd expected. That was all. "I've got a sense of it now."

As I was right now, I would struggle to take it down in one hit. The hardness of the shell, its weight, and the thickness of its skin made it impossible. Which is absolutely fantastic. Finally, an opponent that won't bend after a single strike.

If we'd had the time, I'd have *loved* to play around with it, but unfortunately, we didn't. I'd deal with it quickly. Thankfully, I remembered a Technique that was perfect for a situation like this.

"Lynokis, watch closely now. Though it'll likely be a while before you can learn this yourself." Upon saying that, I took one step forward. I was sure the crew was watching us from the airship, but we were far enough away that they wouldn't be able to see the details of the battle even with a telescope.

Let's get this over with.

"This is a Technique a level above Rumbling Thunder—Comet." A few seconds after I said that, I was already by the crab's feet. Had either Lynokis or the crab even been able to see me? Most likely not.

With a large bang, one of the crab's legs burst off. It was a speed that allowed

not even the blink of an eye, and a physical energy that could barely even be egistered.	



Chi Fist: Comet. With one step, you began your advance; with two steps, you crossed the speed of sound; with the third, you met the speed of light. It could be a punch or a kick—when you reached my level, the form no longer mattered. It was an okay Technique that provided an okay level of strength and required a run-up, but against an opponent of this standard, this was more than enough.

I wasn't actually sure I could've gone any higher with this body... If I had, the bones in my body would have shattered, and my tendons would all have severed. At worst, I would have imploded.

Well, that was okay. I didn't make it a hobby to torture living creatures, but it was also impossible for me to take it down in one shot. What was impossible was impossible, unfortunately. I'll have to cut down your life little by little. Forgive me, crab.

Today's results:

- Blood cross crab [massive] x1, [huge] x6
- Calamity bee x133 (plus very large hive x1)
- Bellwood [huge] x1 (along with its fruit)
- Swordsman mantis x3
- Snow tiger x2
- Assassin eagle x6 (and eggs x2)

They had all at least heard the rumors of the new, obscenely talented adventurer who had appeared in the Kingdom of Altoire. Some had sharp ears, some knew the value of information, some simply overheard by chance, some heard the rumors from a friend of a friend—the ways in which people first learned of her varied, but that morning was the moment when her name became truly *known* in the Empire of Vanderouge.

"Hey, you lot! The crab was taken out!" The news from the ecstatic veteran adventurer reached the ears of the adventurers and bounty hunters who had gathered at the guild to find work, but...

"What crab?"

No one had any idea what he was talking about and they began whispering between themselves. What crab? What was he talking about? What kind of crab?

Of course, every adventurer in Vanderouge knew of that one gargantuan crab. Those a little older had dealt with the crab in some way or another, whether because they'd participated in hunting squads, investigated the island while trying to stay out of its path, or observed the Imperial Army's large-scale attempts to take it down. At some point, though, they had all become accustomed to its presence on that island. They'd simply accepted it was there, believing that one day it would grow old and die. No one could hunt it, so they might as well leave it to die of natural causes.

Because it was such a massive creature, almost no one even considered fighting it anymore. If they didn't get too close, no one would get injured, so why bother with it? Anyone who did go after it tended to be some fresh face or someone who had lost a loved one to it and so was out for revenge.

Everyone knew how dangerous the crab was. They had all acknowledged it was something that humans had no chance of standing up to, so they had simply gotten used to the fact that it lived there. That was why they couldn't understand what the veteran adventurer was talking about.

That crab wasn't something that could be dealt with by a single person. In fact, people had even begun speculating that in the far future it might be designated an elite monster, just like Moumou Lee, Vikeranda, or the Nightruler, whose name brought ruin to any who dared utter it.

"What do you mean, 'what crab'? The blood cross crab. You know, that giant one," the guildmaster said, coming out from the back to confirm the news.

The lobby fell into silence for a moment, before immediately erupting with noise. Some cried out in disbelief, some asked anyone and everyone how high its bounty was, some swore out of personal resentment, some looked as if a weight had been lifted off their shoulders—the reactions were varied, but what was most important was that the crab had been killed.

The guildmaster had been called in because he would be the one to handle

the payout, and so he'd gone to inspect it for himself. The beast had undeniably been the colossal blood cross crab that even the army hadn't been able to take down.

This was how the name of Leeno the adventurer spread through the country
—as the one who had taken down the infamous blood cross crab.

Meanwhile, the same news was brought to Vanderouge's Imperial Army.

"That huge crab was taken down?!" the Ground Force's commander in chief, Gawin—who had been busy doing paperwork in the commanders' office—exclaimed in surprise, eyes wide. Kakana, the commander in chief of the Air Force—who was also busy doing paperwork—could only frown in disbelief.

Numerous squads had been sent out by the country to try and take that crab down. The Ground and Air forces had initially been on bad terms, and they'd been competing to see who could take down the crab first, eager to outwit the other and take credit for its disposal.

However, upon realizing they wouldn't be able to take down the crab alone, they had joined forces and launched a joint operation to attempt to kill it—and yet, they had still failed to defeat it, leaving a bitter mark on their history. The damage and losses incurred in that operation prompted the country to forbid any further attempts on the crab's life. Giving a single island over to nature wasn't such a big loss given the breadth of Vanderouge's territory. It was a choice made placing more importance on the real physical risks over the honor of the state and military. They had to remain on guard against the neighboring Mech Kingdom, so they couldn't lose any more of their men, but...for those in the army who'd had their reputation completely ruined, that crab's continued existence was a scourge. You could even call it their fated enemy.

And yet, that exact crab had now been hunted down.

"Are you serious? Where did you hear that from? Did you confirm it with your own eyes?" Kakana rattled off, glaring at the young soldier.

Her disbelief was understandable. A joint operation of the army's forces had been unable to take it down, despite several attempts, so they'd assumed no one ever could. That perception was especially strong among those who had

taken part in those operations.

"M-Ma'am! It was one of our patrolmen who confirmed it! He accompanied the guildmaster of the adventurer's guild who evaluated it as genuine!" The new recruit's response was more than clear, even as he cowered slightly under Kakana's exerted pressure.

"If the report was made by our own soldier, then it's hard to think it's a lie," Gawin reasoned.

"I know. It's just hard to believe." In her head, Kakana knew that the report wasn't a lie. But as she said, it was simply that hard to believe; it barely felt real—especially because she herself had been one of the people who had faced off against the blood cross crab. "I'm going to go see for myself. Recruit, prepare me a skiff. I'm heading out." Unless she saw it for herself, she wouldn't be able to believe it. There was no way.

"Yes, ma'am!" The soldier saluted and left the room.

That crab had stolen the lives of so many of her men, of her colleagues. How could she not hate its existence? Kakana wanted to see with her own eyes just what sorry state its corpse was in. And then she wanted to make an offering to the graves of those men, to show them that the monster who had taken their lives was now dead. It was frustrating she hadn't been the one to land the final blow, but...beggars couldn't be choosers. Just being able to tell them it was gone was more than enough.

"Hm... All right, I'll go with you," Gawin decided as he watched Kakana put on her hat and coat from the rack.

"I'll go first, Gawin. Being seen with you would just be embarrassing."

"Don't be stupid. We're going to the same place. If we don't go together, people will think we're fighting."

The former disagreements between the two forces had had an effect not only on the army but also on the city itself. In the past, people had strangely split into two factions that made it much harder to work: one on the side of the son who led the land forces and the other for the local shop's daughter who had become an air force officer.

"Tch... Fine, but I'm not riding the same skiff as you."

It was because of that turmoil that the commanders' office had been created where the two could work together to show that they did in fact get along. If their commanders were getting along, then neither the soldiers nor their families should fight.

"Aw, you're so mean, Kana-kana."

"Don't call me such a childish nickname! I'm thirty-one years old, you know!"

"Yeah, and I'm thirty-seven. I'm gettin' old over here. I'd *really* love it if you considered marrying me sometime soon."

"Shut up! I'm never getting married!"

"Even though we live in the same house? Even though we return to the same home every day?"

"I'm leaving!"

Whenever they were alone, the two acted as they always had since they were young. The dynamic of their childhood friendship continued, even after their relationship had developed into cohabitating lovers.

The harbor was overflowing with onlookers when the pair reunited with their old enemy, the blood cross crab. It had been mercilessly dismembered, its pincers, its legs, all of it taken apart, but it was unmistakably that old crab. Its unusually big and thick shell still bore the light marks of the cannonballs they had fired that day—this was undoubtedly the exact crab they had fought.

Seeing it again, bitter memories of that fierce battle rose to the surface... But there was something more pressing to address.

"Who killed it?"

Who in the world had managed to take down a monster that even a whole army couldn't—and how? That was what they were most curious about right now. Had it been some famous mercenary corps that had happened to come their way?

"Leeno the adventurer from the Kingdom of Altoire...?"

This was the moment they first heard that name.

"Kakana, can you come here a minute?" Gawin called just before Kakana could ask for more information.

"Why? Don't get in the way of my investigat—" Kakana turned around, not even hiding her displeasure, but when she saw how calmly Gawin was smiling at her, she followed him without further complaint. "What is it?"

Kakana knew that was the face he made when he had something he wanted to say in private—something he didn't want those around them to hear. On the surface, Gawin's expression was relaxed, as if he wasn't taking anything seriously when it was actually the opposite. He made that face precisely because he was thinking very seriously. Kakana knew that expression well, thanks to how long they'd known each other.

"Don't get involved with this any further," he whispered.

"Are they making their move?"

"Sure are. This is a matter for them to handle."

Gawin glanced to the side. Kakana followed his gaze as naturally as she could and left his side. "All right. But if we're able to make contact with the adventurer, I won't let them take charge on this case. Is that clear?"

"You're such a kind girl, Kana-kana."

"Shut your mouth. I just don't want to get foreigners involved in our affairs. I would rather avoid an international incident. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Nope. I agree with you, actually."

After their exchange, Gawin started to move. He pushed his way through the crowds there to see the crab and made it to the corridor at the side of the warehouse.

"We'll handle them. Is that clear?" a man's deep voice whispered. Before Gawin realized it, there was a large, brawny man standing before him. In reality, he had always been there; he had simply been hiding his presence as if he were one with the shadows.

"No, if it seems they'll respond to our summons, we'll deal with them."

The figure was silent for a long moment. "Fine. I'll allow it. If they don't respond though, we'll make our move."

Those were all the words they exchanged before the large man vanished.

"What a lively old man he is," Gawin muttered as he began walking again.

The large man was Oltar Ixas. He was the former commander of the now-defunct Sixth Division Special Operations Unit of the Imperial Army's Ground Forces. Long ago, he had been the sapper of a small unit of elites that served as a commando unit. Their name had changed with the passage of time and, with the further passage of time, disappeared entirely. Having been in an era of peace for so long, the higher-ups had questioned the need for their existence, and they had ultimately been disbanded.

Oltar Ixas had been the last commander of that unit. He had been involved in the training of military juniors for a while before then returning into the shadows to protect the empire. These days, he led a secret vigilante group that eliminated those neither the army nor the law could touch. He'd gathered a bunch of thugs and army dropouts, trained them up, and turned them into a formidable force.

From Gawin's point of view, they were more like a private army, but at least they weren't causing any problems for now.

Though Oltar was an old war veteran well over fifty, he was still very active. That small interaction was enough to let Gawin see that his patriotism still guided his actions. He was likely still managing his troops as well as always too.

The real issue was what would happen to that vigilante group once Oltar passed away. It was made up of those who originally came from rough backgrounds—both their personalities and characters had been problematic before Oltar picked them up. What would happen when the man who was holding them together was gone?

They would most likely descend into anarchy, perhaps even ending up merged with the mafia families. Oltar's men, his *students*, were strong. Because they were strong, they could be capable of using their power to get whatever

they wanted, living in luxury and growing more arrogant. If things turned out that way, they would become a hindrance and threat to the empire. The leaders of the country tacitly approved of their vigilante existence because they were able to be controlled, but if that stopped being the case...

Well, the time might come when the military would have to dispose of them.

Those were the thoughts that lay behind the gentle smile that sat on Gawin's face.

Later that evening, another report came to the two in their office. Apparently, many more monsters that had been marked as threats in the area had been hunted down one after another. The two decided to return to the port to confirm it for themselves.

This is becoming more and more like a job for them, Gawin thought to himself. There was no way they wouldn't try to learn about an adventurer this skilled, and there was no way they would just leave this newcomer alone either. Whoever this was, they were a clear threat. They wielded power that shouldn't belong to a single person.

If this Leeno woman responded to the calls from the army, then everything would be fine. If she didn't, then Oltar would most definitely make his move. He was a pigheaded old man who couldn't keep up with the times. His thoughts, ideologies, and methods were all stuck in the old ways.

Regardless, Oltar was strong. As an individual, even including the current active duty military, he was likely the strongest. He was never afraid to use his love for his country as a reason to be rough with people. Whatever the outcome, there would probably be trouble.

Gawin prayed that Leeno would answer their call. Things would go smoothly and end amicably if she did. He'd already sent a message to the hotel she was staying at requesting a meeting with her.

Today's profits:

- 20,000,000 krams, blood cross crab [massive] x1

- 6,000,000 krams, blood cross crab [huge] x6
- 13,300,000 krams, calamity bee x133
- 2,000,000 krams, calamity bee nest [huge] (with young bees inside)
 - 5,000,000 krams, bellwood [huge] x1 (fruit attached)
 - 3,060,000 krams, bellwood fruit x102
 - 9,000,000 krams, swordsman mantis x3
- 4,000,000 krams (each), snow tiger x2 (pristine condition)
 - 1,800,000 krams, assassin eagle x6
 - 50,000 krams (each), assassin eagle eggs x2

Combining today's total of 68,260,000 krams with the previous day's earnings, they had made 102,750,000 krams.

Chapter 5: Becoming Famous

Early on the morning of the third day of our expedition, it was lightly snowing outside. The weather was typical of winter so I got ready as usual, thinking it would cause no problems.

Just as we went to leave the hotel, however, the ever-familiar receptionist stopped us as we handed over our key for safekeeping. "Miss, we have received many messages for you." We really did get stopped by him a lot; just yesterday he had stopped us because I smelled too much of crab.

I knew why that had happened too: it was the fluids from the big one. I hadn't been able to take down a monster of that size with a single shot, so I'd had to rip off each of its legs and pincers, which meant I'd gotten soaked in its juices in the process.

Honestly, I hadn't been sure what the issue was. Crab smelled yummy! But it seemed that didn't matter, so I'd obeyed and let them take me to the employee bath again.

That tangent aside, it seemed the time had finally come.

"It must finally be an invitation from him, Lily."

It was finally time for our meeting with Prince Hiero. That was the surface reason I was in Vanderouge to begin with, so as Nia Liston, I had to make sure I prioritized that over anything else.

"Hm...?"

What was this now? Ten folded paper notes were sitting on the well-polished wooden counter. The name of the sender was written on the front of each with the contents inside. The only letter we had been expecting was the one from Prince Hiero, so why were there nine more?

"These ten are the only ones whose identities are known to us. The remaining thirty-five refused to disclose their names, so we did not accept them."

Thirty-five... Ahh, I see what's going on.

"Master, it looks like your name's been getting out there, after all."

"It's that big crab's fault, isn't it?"

Apparently, the port had been in an uproar yesterday because the blood cross crab was being transported through it. It had one of the biggest bounties in the country, so it was famous in Vanderouge. The peak of the commotion had passed around noon, when they had finished processing the crab and removed it from the public eye.

The rabble who still hadn't cooled down from all the excitement had been there waiting for us when we arrived back in Eunesgo, and it had all turned into a bit of a pain. Thankfully, even though the name of Leeno had spread, details of her appearance hadn't, so we'd simply walked right by them and they'd never realized who we were.

"What should we do?" Lynokis asked.

It would definitely look suspicious if the student were to read the teacher's messages and come to a decision for her right in front of the receptionist.

"For now, let's just check the important one and then check the rest after we board the airship. The captain is waiting so we really should hurry," I said.

"Ah... You're right. Let's do that then." Lynokis left the one that was addressed from Hiero and put the remaining nine away in her pocket. "If this person or anyone representing them comes here, please tell them I understand," she said to the receptionist after confirming what was written in Hiero's note.

A meeting with Hiero was of the utmost priority, so there was no need for her to consult with me. We would simply adjust our schedule as needed.

Today, we went out the rear entrance of the hotel and took a detour through the back alleys to get to the port—the regular entrance was mobbed with people looking for us. The number of people who wanted to know about Leeno the adventurer had only increased once word of the crab's death got around.

"Well, at least we're doing a good job at selling your name."

"Yes, it will likely be good advertising for the national tournament."

She was right. The fact we could manage this level of public interest alongside also raising money really did save us a lot of time.

"Good morning," we greeted the captain who was waiting in front of the airship as usual. Despite how early it was, the port was surprisingly packed. Though many of them were weaklings, I could feel the gazes of those who were clearly shady. We'd covered up our faces as a simple disguise, but it seemed possible we'd already been spotted.

We decided to board the airship quickly before anyone could approach us.

"You've really become famous now. We had a ton of people asking about you," the captain said to us as he joined our table after getting the airship moving. We had been waiting for him with the aeronautical chart laid out.

It was time for us to discuss the schedule for the day.

"While we're still in Vanderouge, please avoid talking about us as much as possible," Lynokis warned.

"Of course, Tork's already made that much clear. Any time they ask us about you, we tell them to ask Cedony."

Even here, the support from Cedony Trading shone; they were just that capable.

"So, what's the plan for today?" he asked.

"We've yet to decide on anything specific."

"I see. Just aiming for whatever monsters will sell for a high price?"

We'd spent the first two days hunting over a wide area to get a sense of how much the monsters sold for, and then starting on the third day, we'd decided to focus on the monsters that were of high value. We'd had a rough schedule that we'd set up in advance, but we'd now make adjustments that would make us the most money.

That gigantic and valuable blood cross crab had been one of a kind, so unfortunately, we couldn't hunt any more at that size. That meant we had to go

for a change of plans—towards the road of more money.

"Then allow us to give you the quote for yesterday's hunt first so you can use it as a reference point."

"Thank yo— Wh-Whoa... Over sixty million..." Lynokis was bewildered by the figures on the documents that the captain had given her. So we'd earned over sixty million krams yesterday, had we?

"Combined with what you earned on day one, you've crossed the one hundred million mark. You're incredible."

Yes, keep piling on the praise. My fists are worth way more than even one billion krams. Though I felt smug, the looks of envy were being aimed at Leeno, not me.

"Any more orders from Mr. Tork?" I asked, interrupting the moment between Lynokis trembling at what was written on the document, and the admiring gaze of the captain. You'll have time for this once we've discussed everything we need to.

"Yup, he asked for some more fire sea serpents."

Fire sea serpents, hm? We'd actually searched for some yesterday but failed to find any.

"If you're after monsters of high value, then the fire sea serpents seem like the best option. Ones around the size of your catch two days ago go for about ten mil each. Plus, Leeno said she has a special way that she wants to hunt them this time."

Special way? Hearing those words and seeing the meaningful look from the captain, Lynokis took a deep breath and folded over the documents.

"I suppose we do... Does that sound good?" Lynokis asked me. I nodded. I didn't know what this "special method" the captain was going on about was, but getting ten million krams per monster was not a bad deal.

"Let's take a look at the remaining messages." I decided now would be a good time to check those unopened notes from the hotel while we sat down in the

middle of the deck.

"Ah, of course. Here you are, Young Mistress."

I took the pieces of paper and opened them up. We were the only ones here, so we didn't have to worry about prying eyes.

Let's see now... Hm. The nine messages were from the commanders in chief of the Imperial Army, the guildmaster of the Vanderouge branch of the adventurer's guild, the guildmaster of the merchant's guild, the Vanderouge sect of the Church of the Saints, several famous adventuring parties, two Vanderouge nobles, and an orphanage.

There were some big names in there, but the content boiled down to three groups: they either wanted to meet Leeno, talk with her, or ask for donations. A portion of them selfishly demanded we go somewhere at some specific time without even trying to arrange it with us first, but I had no intention to pay any mind to those who gave us no consideration. We might have been citizens of the Kingdom of Altoire, but just because we were bound to abide by the laws of the land didn't mean we had to abide by the customs and conventions of their aristocracy.

We'd be leaving Vanderouge in two or three days anyway, so surely it would be fine to ignore them.

"I don't care about the rest, but I am a little curious about the one from the orphanage," Lynokis said.

"Understandably so."

The contents of the message from the orphanage had been about how they were struggling for food and so would like a donation. To be quite honest, I didn't think highly of those who would willingly ask a complete stranger for money.

That said, if there really were children suffering in poverty, I couldn't just leave them be. If their situation was so desperate that they could so shamelessly ask for money, I felt sorry for the kids. But I also felt a little uncomfortable at the prospect of getting so involved with a foreign country's affairs... Outsiders involving themselves in the politics or economics of a

country was just begging for trouble.

"Couldn't we ask Cedony to look into them and, if they seem genuine, give some of our money?" I suggested.

"I...suppose we could do that."

Good. It didn't feel good to just outright ignore it— Ah.

"They found one already," I said, approaching the edge of the deck.

"That was fast. I look forward to your demonstration."

Yes, yes. I stood at the edge of the deck and looked at the sea's surface below. The target seemed pretty big, but how much would it go for?

The surface of the sea split open with a splash, and a huge sea serpent suddenly jumped out, mouth open wide.

It was a fire sea serpent. Fire sea serpents were known as the ruffians of the sea that would eat anything they could fit in their mouths. It attacked anything that looked remotely edible. If the prey wasn't edible, the snake would simply kill it and dump it. It was a very rough-tempered beast.

Its body was covered in gray scales, but the inside of its mouth was bright red like raging flames, giving it its name. When airships approached the ocean, they would attack just like this. We—or more specifically, our airship—was its target.

The serpent leaped out of the sea, casting its shadow over the ship—but I got one leg above it and kicked it back down again. It had caused a mighty splash when it leaped out of the water, but it made an even bigger one as it landed back in.



"I'll be back soon!" Leeno called out as she dived into the sea with a lifeline attached to her thin clothing. She was making it look like she was off to land the finishing blow, but naturally, that was just to maintain the image that she was the one taking down the monsters.

In reality, the serpent had died at the moment I kicked its head—its skull would've shattered.

The special method that the captain had mentioned was to fly one of our airships low over the sea and counter any fire sea serpents that came to attack. It was a method that used an airship as bait, like we were fishing for the serpents. All we had to do was wait on the deck of the cargo ship after the other members of the crew had been evacuated and wait for it to attack. It was something we could do because we had two airships.

It was a crazy method that people only trusted would work because they had Leeno's strength on their side. Not that I minded that kind of reckless thinking.

The hard part of this hunt wasn't my killing the serpents but Lynokis's dives into the freezing-cold winter waters. The work would be arduous under these conditions, but I needed her to try her best. This was its own form of training, a kind of ascetic practice. In fact, thinking of it that way made me want to join in, but Lynokis stopped me. She really liked this kind of thing, didn't she? How dare she keep it all to herself!

"Wahhhhhh, it's so coooooold...!"

Lynokis came to the surface in a way that made it look like she'd killed the serpent under the water. Its body floated up behind her shortly after.

As we approached the surface of the water to pick up the fire sea serpent, Lynokis climbed up the lifeline onto the deck, soaked in the waters of the ocean. The inside of the airship was both heated and protected from the wind, so she should've been able to warm herself up properly...

Except there was already a second one approaching.

Just one more and then you can warm your body.

Today's results:

- Fire sea serpent [massive] x3
- Fire sea serpent [large] x3
- Lance shark [huge] x2
- Sawtooth jellyfish [huge] x1

There was a table in the hotel's lobby in an area primarily used as a lounge for those waiting for hotel guests, or for hotel guests waiting for people from outside.

The two men sitting side by side were the former.

"Do you really want to meet her? Maybe we should go home," the man on the left said.

"Why would we go home? I finally got a chance to sneak out of my dorm. I don't exactly have many opportunities to meet *the* Nia Liston."

What's that supposed to mean? the man on the left thought to himself. He held his tongue, though all he wanted to say to the other was that he should go home and eat shit. Given their positions, he couldn't say such aggressive words directly, but had the circumstances been different, he would have said them with no hesitation, regardless of how it would make the other feel.

That girl was already a part of Altoire's foundation.

She was an irreplaceable part of the current magivision industry—now, when she wasn't even a teenager yet. She would continue to grow, shine brighter, and captivate more and more of the people of Altoire, no, the *world*. She would become a solitary treasure of the kingdom, matched by none.

There was also Hildetaura, who had long been obsessing over magivision, and Reliared of the Silvers, who had recently had a rapid growth in recognition as well. They were already stars, but they would only shine brighter as they grew. They would become like suns illuminating the world.

And yet... And yet, why did they need to attract pests that could devour that light?

The man on the left's name was Hiero Altoire, second prince of the Kingdom of Altoire. He was twenty years old, a handsome man with characteristic blond hair that flared out slightly. In his youth, he had been an ambitious young man, plotting to overthrow the first prince and take the throne, but when he graduated from high school, he had been given the role of acting chairman of the broadcasting station, and over time, he had forgotten all about that ambition.

Instead, he'd been completely captivated by the possibilities of magivision. He would be willing to give up not just the throne but his royal status entirely if it meant he could remain in his job. He had also called off his engagement to the daughter of a high-class aristocrat who had been adamant about trying to push Hiero onto the throne—her father had simply become too much of a hassle.

Unfortunately, that had put him in an awfully awkward position in the aristocratic circles...

However, deciding to simply ignore all of that, Hiero had distanced himself from the social life and instead focused everything on his work; he seemed happier that way too. At the very least, rather than a face distorted with reckless ambition, he was now able to lead a healthy and dignified life with nothing to hide. With no skeletons in his closet, his former political enemies had decreased considerably, and he had even managed to mend his relationship with his older brother, the first prince.

It had become much easier for him to live his life. He was happy he had found his purpose.

Next to Hiero was a man who appeared rather shallow with glossy black hair and two distinctive black moles under his left eye. He was Christo Volt Vanderouge. Currently, he was fourth prince of the Empire of Vanderouge and eighteen years old.

Though barely even an adult, the prince had already settled nicely into the role of playboy, with not even a hint of his princely origins coming through in the air he gave off. He'd been greatly interested in the magivision that Hiero had brought to the country.

Their shared interest had led to the two princes' blooming friendship, and as

they were close in age, they'd soon become comfortable with each other. Christo had become a necessary stepping stone and connection for Hiero to spread magivision through the country.

That was why there were some things Hiero just couldn't ignore.

"Say, is Nia really as fast as they say? They're not just angling the camera or doing some sort of fancy tricks to make it look that way, are they? It's not a trick?"

He was flippant, a loudmouth, shallow, and superficial, and he would chat up a girl the minute he knew she was old enough, but what was most important was that he was truly a passionate fan of magivision. If he wasn't, Hiero wouldn't want him to meet Nia Liston, and he wouldn't even give him the chance. He'd stop him no matter what.

"I'd heard she was doing it for real, but I wonder if that's true. This is the first time I'm meeting her so I have no idea." Hiero had also never met her, but he'd often heard about Nia from Hildetaura. Apparently, she was always very calm, and no matter whom she met, she was never intimidated. Sometimes, it seemed like she wasn't really even a child. What was most surprising was that she apparently showed no qualms about making jokes concerning the king.

In short, his sister's opinion was that Nia was a perfect tool for diplomatic matters.

The only reason Hiero had brought Christo was because of how unlike a child Nia was. If she *were* like a regular child, he would've been much more worried at the prospect of the two of them meeting.

Christo's princely status meant that he couldn't easily leave the country. He now had the chance to meet a magivision actor for the very first time. Hiero really did not want to let them meet, and he really wanted Christo to just go to hell, but...he also deeply understood the desire to meet her, so he had reluctantly agreed to bring him along.

In the course of his marketing, Hiero had watched every piece of magivision footage he was using for his advertising, and so he had great interest in all the actors and actresses who appeared. Naturally, Nia Liston was one of those actresses. Surely even a playboy wouldn't lay a hand on such a young girl.

That was true *for now*. But what about a decade from now? Could this meeting inadvertently lead to the possibility that Altoire—no, the *world*—would lose Nia Liston, its radiant treasure? Would this man do something that would dirty her shine? Just thinking about that left Hiero so, so...!

"You are practically radiating hostility, my dude. That's pretty rude, if you ask me," Christo pointed out with a sneer on his face. That response threatened to only further stoke his hostility, so Hiero took a deep breath and calmed himself down. If he thought too hard about it, he'd reach the conclusion that the only choice he had was to kill his friend, so it would be best if he stopped.

Nia Liston would soon return to the hotel. It was too late for Hiero to fight the prince over it now.

Would you like to have dinner tonight?

That was the concise message from second prince Hiero that had been delivered to us this morning. We'd given our response then and there, so we'd be meeting tonight as he wished.

"I think it's about time we head back," I said.

"You're right. Shall we go?"

Lynokis and I finished up our hunting expedition a little earlier than usual and returned to the hotel. Meeting with Hiero was our "main" reason for being in Vanderouge, after all—we couldn't skip it, no matter what.

We were all ready for the arranged dinner. The moment we returned, we had a bath to wash off all the sweat and seawater, then dried and styled our hair. I dispelled the magic dye, turning my hair back to its usual white. After that, I sat and sipped away at my tea as we waited for the sun to set.

The snow that had been lightly falling this morning was now much heavier. *If* it keeps going like this, we might not be able to go hunting tomorrow, I thought to myself while doing my terribly loathed homework, only for Lynokis to interrupt my thoughts by scolding me for stopping my work and insisting that I continue.

Then finally, the time came.

"Let's go."

We wouldn't be attending tonight's dinner as Leeno and Lily but as Nia Liston and Lynokis. I was wearing the plain dress that I usually wore, and Lynokis was dressed in her servant attire. Even though it had only been a few days since we'd changed our roles, it already felt a little nostalgic.

With that, we left the room. If Hiero had come on time, he was probably waiting in the lobby already.

Today's profits:

- 24,000,000 krams, fire sea serpent [massive] x3
- 15,000,000 krams, fire sea serpent [large] x3
- 10,000,000 krams, lance shark [huge] x2
- 3,000,000 krams, sawtooth jellyfish [huge] x1

The total came to 52,000,000 krams. Added to the total of the first and second days, we'd made 154,750,000 krams.

Then we were on to day four of our Vanderouge expedition.

"Young Mistress, it appears all flights have been grounded due to the weather."

Early that morning, a member of staff had come bearing a message from Cedony Trading. It was a good thing we had prepared to go out just in case—if Lynokis had answered the door in her attendant outfit rather than her adventurer's gear, it would've absolutely raised suspicion.

After taking the message, Lynokis had closed the door and relayed it to me while I sat at the table.

"So we have to cancel today's work, after all."

I had gotten changed into my dogi and ready to leave, but I hadn't dyed my hair yet—it was still my usual white after last night. When I looked out the window, all I saw outside was white. Not only was the snow heavy, the wind

itself was also strong. It was only natural that any flights would be canceled.

The captain had told us yesterday that if the snow hadn't stopped by today, they might not be able to fly, so we'd already been suspecting this might happen. Though we'd hoped we could avoid it, we had received the unfortunate message that the airships could not be flown.

This was a situation that was well beyond our control. It would be catastrophic if we forced the ship to fly regardless and something happened that caused the airship to crash-land. Being in the sky was not so different from being at sea; fishermen would determine if it was safe to go out based on the weather conditions. Nature was not to be underestimated. So long as it was a hazard to human life, we could not risk it.

"The quote for yesterday's haul is also here. Would you like to see for yourself?"

"No, I'll leave that to you."

Don't show numbers to me. I'm already sick of them from all my homework.

But...

"I am curious about how much we've raised so far, though."

"I'm curious myself." Lynokis opened the envelope and checked the papers that were inside. "If that high-speed liner is available for our flight back, we could squeeze in some more hunting tomorrow, but if it's not, we won't be able to do any hunting before we leave. That would also mean our money-earning efforts would end here."

It would essentially make yesterday our last day. We'd informed Tork of how long we'd be staying, and he'd told us then that he wasn't sure if they'd be able to prepare the high-speed liner for our trip back. Even if he could secure it, if the weather was still this bad tomorrow, we wouldn't even be able to continue our hunting then either.

It wasn't as if I could change when the next semester started, so we would be going on an airship back to Altoire tomorrow, guaranteed. What time we left, however, was still undecided. Would we be returning home early or did we have some leeway until the evening? Half a day was still enough time to do

some more hunting, so I really wished we knew.

"Let's see, totaling up all we've earned so far, we have a bit less than 160,000,000 krams raised."

"That's half what I'd hoped for."

"Our goal was three hundred million, after all. You know, these conversations are really making me lose my sense of money." Lynokis sighed.

Hm? Well...I couldn't say I had any sense of monetary value to begin with. Even now, the only perception I had of one billion krams was that it was a lot of money.

"Given we've really only been hunting for three days, I'd say that crossing the 150,000,000 mark is already really good, if you ask me," Lynokis commented as she folded up the documents and slipped them back into the envelope. "What are our plans for today then? Make good on that promise from yesterday?"

Now that things had turned out like this, it wouldn't be so bad to aim for a different avenue of fundraising.

"I'm against it," Lynokis continued. "I don't care if he's a prince; he's a superficial fop. It's unbelievable how frivolous he is. He's the kind of man I least want to approach you."

Yeah, you've been saying that since yesterday.

"Honestly, take a minute to think of our ages. I'm seven, and he's eighteen." What could she possibly be worried about when we were so separate in age?

"You really don't understand. Why are you always like this?"

Why was she giving me a scornful look? *Huh? What? What are you talking about?*

"Listen to me, Young Mistress. It is an undeniable fact that your cuteness transcends all other creatures in this world, erasing the line of even adult and child. As the president of 'those who will accept anything so long as it's cute,' I can tell you those types of people are run-of-the-mill. If you think everything will be okay simply because you're a child, you're going to be hit with a reality check one day. From now on, you need to view any adult you come across,

except myself, as someone that might not write kids off. Do you understand?"

Yes. I do see, Lynokis. This was one of those things it wasn't worth listening to. She yammered on for so long, but what she was saying was so *inconsequential*.

"Shall we get going?"

"Did you even hear what I said?! I'm telling you that man is frivolous! You can't meet with him! That man is far too easy and superficial!"

The self-proclaimed president of "being okay with children" who should be run *out of* the mill was saying something to me, but there was no value in listening to her, so I didn't. Honestly, I couldn't trust this attendant of mine at all.

Lynokis's attitude all stemmed from the previous night's events.

"She's...the real thing! She's the real thing! This is amazing! It's Nia Liston in the flesh!"

We met with Hiero Altoire in the hotel lobby as we'd planned. But as soon as we went to greet him, someone else excitedly pushed the prince aside—the fourth prince of Vanderouge, Christo Volt Vanderouge.

Hiero suggested that since we weren't meeting in an official capacity, we should drop all the stuffy formalities and I agreed.

Christo immediately introduced himself in full since it could've been a pain if he'd faked or hidden his name and the truth came out later. It was very considerate of him; if you unwittingly got involved with someone important, it had the potential to evolve into something much more troublesome later.

"Just for tonight, I want you to think of me as just another fan rather than a prince," he said, before blabbering on about the programs and projects I'd been involved in, even though Hiero was insistently kicking him in the butt and telling him to get out of the way.



Christo really did come across as just another fan. No, not a regular fan, he was more like...the staff at the broadcasting station when they suddenly started talking to me with great enthusiasm. They'd watch a show I was in and ask me all sorts of questions: "What was the intention of that project?" "What was the goal of the project?" "What was the reason behind what you said and did then?" They wanted to express their own opinions and ask what I as a performer thought of the ideas they had floating in their heads.

This man came across as one of the passionate broadcasting staff who was idling in seeing their ideas to fruition. That realization helped me understand just why Hiero had brought Christo here to meet me: he saw Christo as an opening. He had his eye on Christo as the man who would plant the seeds of magivision in Vanderouge and nurture them until they were fully grown.

Being the prince was certainly a big benefit, but the strong motivation and passion Christo held was especially noteworthy. There was naturally no way to know for sure how well things would go, but there was no way a person could succeed without either of those qualities. That was why Christo was someone who could already be considered light-years ahead, despite living in a country where magivision was yet to prosper.

His mindset was already at the starting line of becoming a part of a broadcasting station.

While we ate, I spoke a lot with Christo. Sometimes, I would hear Hiero—who was meant to be the main person we were meeting with—muttering things to himself like "You go home already," or "Go to hell," but at the end of the day, he was the one who had brought Christo with him. I prioritized speaking with Christo precisely because I understood that Hiero had known this would happen. Though I really hadn't done anything other than answer all the younger prince's questions.

And that led to today.

"Are you really going to go? Can I not persuade you to reconsider?"

"This is also tied to PR and promotion of magivision, you know." Besides, with us unable to go out on any hunting expeditions, we had nothing else to do. We were meant to be here in secret, so it wasn't as if we could go out sightseeing

around Vanderouge like regular tourists either. The snow was heavy too, so it wasn't exactly the most ideal weather to be walking around in.

In which case, I thought it was perfectly fine for us to take Christo up on his offer.

"I'll be having a gathering with some friends of mine—would you like to come for a quick visit? I want to speak with you more. I want to hear more of your stories. Please consider making time for us." That was what Christo had asked of me last night.

Apparently it was his friend's birthday, so a few of their classmates who were free were going to meet up. Hiero was invited as well, and it sounded as if they were just going to have a casual meal to pass the time. It wasn't an official gathering, so anyone could invite anyone.

When he'd invited me to it, I'd told him that I'd go if we had the time. I had two priorities while I was here: first was meeting with Hiero, and second was earning money. This gathering furthered neither goal, so I'd intended to decline—but then our expedition had been canceled due to the weather and so our schedule had opened up. Now that we had the time, I saw no harm in going.

We could pop in for a little bit and see how things were going, and if I thought I was getting in the way, we could leave. If Hiero was going, then there was no doubt he would try to market magivision in the process. If I was present, I could give him some assistance in that regard—perhaps my presence could even become the deciding factor.

This was both a vital activity of Project Magivision and also a form of networking. When the day came that magivision was finally implemented in Vanderouge, I would undoubtedly end up being called over myself, anyway. I could consider this time spent building the foundations for future work—it didn't sound half bad when put like that. Especially since my other priorities were impossible right now.

"Listen, it'll be fine. Get in contact with Prince Hiero, would you? If you don't do it, then I'll go on my own."

"All right, already..." Lynokis grumbled.

We met up with Hiero just before lunchtime. Apparently they would have an assortment of food where we were headed, so we decided we'd have lunch there. When we headed to the hotel lobby at the appointed time, our visitor was waiting.

"Thank you for your patience."

"Hey, Nia." When he saw me approaching, Hiero stood himself up from the same table he'd waited at last night and greeted me. His blond hair flared out rather distinctively, but even that made him a handsome young prince. He was one of those kinds of people that you couldn't see as anything but a noble, because of either the air of elegance that oozed from him or the upper-class vibe that he couldn't conceal. Though, if you were someone in the know, all you had to do was look at his eyes and see the little red dot in the middles of his green irises to know exactly who he was.

He did resemble the king quite a bit. It made sense given they were father and son, but I really hoped he hadn't also inherited the personality of that whippersnapper, or I'd no doubt find him *very* unpleasant. I prayed that wasn't the case.

"Sorry for bringing such a nuisance to meet you yesterday."

Did he mean Christo?

"You needed to, didn't you? You wouldn't just bring him for no reason." The moment I said that, Hiero's eyes—that proof of his royal lineage—began exerting a little more pressure, though a pleasant smile remained on his face.

"You're so similar to Hilde. Should I reconsider treating you like a child as well?"

By this, I assumed he was asking if he should treat me as someone who was knowledgeable, as I'd easily figured out why he'd brought Christo along. I could understand that much as the child of an aristocrat.

"I struggle to follow very detailed discussions, but it is unnecessary to treat me as a child. I'm not the kind of carefree little girl who's appeared by a piece of candy."

"Got it. I'll treat you as such then."

I thought we were going to immediately head for our destination, but Hiero instead suggested we have a little chat before we left and sat back down. I sat myself next to him. If we were going to be discussing sensitive matters, then we'd likely need to be close. Lynokis stood behind to block possible eavesdroppers. She could be one shady girl, but she was a very proficient personal attendant.

"Am I correct in interpreting you accepting Christo's invitation as a way of assisting with my magivision promotion activities?"

"Correct, but if it seems I'm only making things harder for you, I will leave immediately."

Hiero was trying to spread magivision all across Vanderouge—the customer was this country. It was the upper echelons of Vanderouge, the key figures, that he'd have to persuade. There were most definitely various complicated interpersonal relationships and power plays that I simply wasn't privy to. If I was careless in how I involved myself, I would only end up interfering with Hiero's already tenuous position among the ruling classes of Vanderouge. I could end up completely destroying everything he'd painstakingly built up.

Acting with the intent of doing good but then having it completely backfire was not a rare occurrence. That was a situation I wanted to avoid at all costs, which meant I had to be able to judge when it was time for me to stand back. Not everything was so casual I could try things out on a whim and see what happened without consequence.

"I'm sure you'll be fine. You don't seem like the kind of child who would inadvertently ruin everything. You were answering Christo's questions yesterday both safely and confidently."

"That was only because he was considerate in his own way, as well."

As Christo had said at the start, he'd interacted with me as a fan, not as the prince. He'd never once touched on anything that might concern key persons of the Kingdom of Altoire or anything to do with the structure or systems tied to magivision; he had purely focused on the programs and projects I had been involved in. It had made it much easier for me to respond to his questions; not a single one of them had left me digging for an appropriate answer.

That charisma that allowed him to hold conversations in such a comfortable manner was no doubt his weapon. My ultimate impression was that he was not a book that should be judged by its cover—he wasn't someone to underestimate. I wouldn't deny he was a little frivolous though. From my point of view, however, that was also one of his weapons.

"If you could understand that much, then you'll be completely fine."

Really? I guess I don't need to be so tense, after all.

"Then how would you like me to act while there?" I asked.

"I don't feel the need to put any restrictions on you. Just continue conversations in the direction I'm leading them. I do feel bad about using someone whom I've practically just met, but..."

"Our goals are the same and our interests are aligned. Don't forget I used you to get into this country myself. It's simply a give-and-take. The most important thing right now is to spread magivision around the country, yes?"

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right." Hiero stood up and held his hand out. "Let's go, Nia."

I placed my hand into his.

"Let's."

It seemed he was willing to escort me. I felt awfully humbled being escorted by a *prince* of all people.

Waiting for us outside was an extravagant black-lacquered skiff that looked like a carriage with no wheels. It appeared to fit around six people. This must have been what Hiero used to traverse through the snowy city.

"I see that airships are allowed to travel through the streets in Vanderouge," I remarked. It was called the Empire of Flight for a reason, I supposed. It was forbidden in Altoire to do such a thing; the only exception was in times of emergency.

"Only royalty and nobility, and there are limits set on speed and altitude. I imagine the time will come when commoners will own and use their own airships... Accidents will likely increase when it does."

Our shoes crunched through a light layer of snow as we escaped from the frigid wind into the skiff. The inside was split into front and back with the front being the driver's seat. Hiero and I sat in the back, while Lynokis, who was accompanying us as our bodyguard, sat up front with the driver.

It was nice and warm inside. The interior was upholstered in a burgundy velvet with a luxurious finish, clearly made for a noble. *So this is a luxury skiff... Wait.*

"Depart, please."

Just as I remembered something, Hiero ordered the driver to leave.

Right. I completely forgot. I haven't gone to look at what airship I'd like. It had completely slipped my mind. I had been too focused on hunting. I'd also been distracted by having to do my detested winter homework even while abroad. Mmm, I don't think we'll have the time to go take a quick look... I think my only opportunity would be on the way home from the party.

I guessed there was the option to consult with Cedony and see what they could prepare, but... Whatever. Having my own private airship wasn't really that necessary. I could think about it later.

Barely anyone was out and about in the bad weather, but a lot of businesses still seemed to be open. We stopped at a shop along the way, and Hiero bought an expensive crate of wine as a gift. While we were there, I decided to buy a couple bottles of the same wine as a souvenir for my parents. I wanted to drink it myself, but I was *still* too young. I passed them to Lynokis, who then arranged with the shop to have it sent to our hotel. I hadn't even realized they did deliveries like that.

Given I'd spent so much of last night talking to Christo, I made sure to talk with Hiero plenty on the way to the gathering. And yet, for some reason, no matter what topics we brought up, we always ended up returning to magivision. Maybe this was one of those occupational habits.

"It was your brother that came up with the idea for *Cooking Princess*, right? I'd love to reward him for his ingenuity."

"Hilde said the same."

"The paper plays from the Silvers were a painful hit. I really wish we had been the ones to come up with that."

"I feel the exact same way. It was frustrating to watch."

Before long, the skiff reached our destination.

"I'd love to keep chatting, but I suppose we should head in."

We'd gotten so into our conversation that we were there before we knew it. Hiero, sitting opposite me, disembarked first and held the door open as he helped me step out of the skiff—truly a gentlemanly prince.

So this was the acting chairman for the Altoire Broadcasting Station. If I remembered what I'd been told correctly, the actual chairman, at least on paper, was the previous king, and he was the leader of the magivision industry. In reality though, he was just a figurehead. Hiero Altoire was really the one at the helm.

Even only knowing him for a short time, I can see that he's as sharp as his father. The king was so devoted to his position as the ruler of the country that he shut out even his family from his mind, and Hiero was just as devoted to his position as acting chairman. As proof of that, he had watched eighty to ninety percent of magivision programs—no, perhaps he'd watched all of them.

Back before the Silvers had joined the fray, that had likely been quite a simple affair, but nowadays, there were several new shows every day. It would take at least half a day to watch them all. Apparently, he used his authority to view the programs directly from the manastones in which the recordings were stored, so he had the advantage of not having to care so much about when or where he watched them, but...even with that, where did he find the time to watch them all when he was this busy promoting magivision in a foreign country?

That led me to the frightening conclusion that perhaps Hiero's life outside of work consisted solely of watching magivision. Was he even getting enough sleep?

I dared not to ask and see. Hiero was not particularly keen on making a point of it, nor did he want me to sympathize with him, nor did he want to boast

about it. However, there was no denying that this man was not a gem so easily found. If he were to one day disappear, I didn't trust that the magivision industry would survive. I was beginning to feel that the responsibility he was being made to bear was far too great.

The finances of the Liston family were a concern, but by this point, I really hoped magivision could become mainstream soon. I hoped we could make things a little easier for Hiero.

Being the acting chairman seemed to be a much harder job than I'd imagined. His mind and spirit might have been keeping up, but what about his body? You could push yourself much more as a young person, but even then, there were still limits.

I really hoped he didn't end up collapsing from overwork.

"Welcome to the Huskitan Estate."

While Hiero and I had been chatting in the skiff, we had entered the estate grounds and passed through the garden, and the skiff parked in front of the house located a fair distance from the gate. As soon as we exited, a middle-aged butler was there to greet us.

This house is huge... Given the one who had invited us was the fourth prince of Vanderouge, perhaps it was a given that it wouldn't be a gathering of the common people. What had the butler said again? The Huskitan Estate? I hadn't heard of the Huskitans before, but it seemed they were quite renowned within Vanderouge, and decently high-ranking nobles to boot.

I didn't know the etiquette for nobles in Vanderouge... All right, I'll stick with what I know, and if it doesn't work, I'll just act like a child. Hell, I technically am a child.

"Nia! It's so nice to see you!"

And there he was. As soon as we entered, Christo enthusiastically welcomed me. *Don't click your tongue, Lynokis. You're not subtle.*

"You really came! You came to see me! I'm so moved!"

"You still half asleep or something? It's already afternoon; wake the hell up," Hiero snapped.

Ignoring the prince's cold jab, Christo placed a hand on my back and urged me inside. I guessed he wanted to lead me somewhere. Hiero, I don't think a public space is the right time to tell a prince to go to hell. You're going to cause a very real diplomatic issue.

I'd rather give my greetings to the host first, but Christo was being insistent, so I decided to let him drag me where he wanted. I doubted he'd treat me badly.

He ended up taking me to a warm room with a lit fireplace. I wasn't sure if it was a reception room or a drawing room. It wasn't very big, but it was well furnished and looked like a comfortable space to hang around in.

"Nia's here! The princess of Altoire has arrived!"

What are you talking about? Hildetaura is the princess. I knew he was simply referencing my fame, but it felt a bit weird when there was an actual princess among my peers. It was a misleading nickname. There were three people to whom Christo made such an exaggerated, false, misleading introduction:

From the right, we first had a girl who looked a lot like Christo. At least...she looked like a girl? She was fairly androgynous so I wasn't entirely sure. She looked about his age, if not a little younger.

In the middle was a red-haired young man with a fairly large build. He was far from being as strong as Lynokis or myself, but he looked like he kept in shape, at least.

And then on the left was a woman with eye-catching good looks. Her long, dark brown hair was beautiful.

The three were chatting together on the sofas in front of the fire. Christo had probably been with them until we arrived.

"Oh, they're here. Um... Sorry, let me make my greetings to the prince first." The red-haired man stood up and gave a quick greeting to Hiero, who was standing right behind me. "Your Highness, thank you for coming all this way. I'd like to reassure you that this is a very private affair, so if possible, I'd love it if

we could simply forget our status and positions for today."

"Of course. I always intended to come here on Christo's invitation and as your friend, Zack."

Ah, so this is one of the people of the estate. All of them looked to be in their late teens, so it seemed likely they were friends with Christo not through status but through genuine friendship.

After finishing his greeting to the prince, he knelt down on one knee in front of me. "Welcome, Nia Liston. I have seen you many times on the magivision that His Highness has shown me." His smile was endearingly awkward; he probably wasn't very good with either girls or children. In that respect, Christo stood out even more. "My name is Zackford Huskitan. It's my fiancée's birthday today."

His fiancée, hm?

"It's nice to meet you, Master Zackford. My name is Nia Liston. I selfishly requested to accompany Prince Hiero to this occasion. I am concerned that my manners may not be suited to your local customs, so I hope you will forgive me if I am a little rude." I lifted the hem of my dress and curtsied, just as Mrs. Rhyme had taught me. Surely that wouldn't turn out to be offensive.

"It must have been cold out there. Come by the fireplace. I'll introduce you to the other two."

Well, it appeared I was welcome, at least, and I couldn't detect any animosity towards me from anyone. But...from what I could see, they all appeared to be of fairly high status. They all gave off the vibe of sons and daughters of upper nobility.

First was the young red-haired man, Zackford. Judging from the size of both the estate and the surrounding grounds, the Huskitans must have been a large noble family. They likely held quite a lot of power in the empire.

The girl who looked exactly like Christo was likely a member of the imperial family. I imagined they were siblings, either full or half. Or maybe she was just a relative? I wasn't sure, but they had to be related *somehow*. In which case, she would have quite the power herself.

The lady with the dark-brown hair gave a very similar feeling to Hiero. She had a beauty and elegance that just *screamed* royalty or nobility. Perhaps she was also someone affiliated with the imperial family. At the very least, she had money. Even if you didn't have the power, money was just as good.

And then there was Christo himself. There wasn't much more to say there. Not only could he be relied on for money, authoritative power, and declarative power, he was also fascinated by magivision. If magivision was to spread through Vanderouge, no doubt Christo was the one who would stand at the forefront of development.

I see. What an excellent gathering.

If we did a good job at selling magivision here, then there would likely be great strides made in the progress of promoting magivision in the country.

Zackford Huskitan introduced me to the two girls present—and it was pretty much as I had suspected. It was in line with my expectations, not greatly far off the mark.

The woman who looked just like Christo was Crowen Volt Vanderouge. As I thought, she was his younger sister. Though they had different mothers, they looked very alike. Unlike her brother, who was the picture of a frivolous man, the sister seemed much more uptight. This impression likely came from the sharpness of her eyes. Out of the four of them—five, if you included the prince—she was the strongest. She hadn't crossed into the realm of the abnormal though, so it was a pointless comparison.

The lady with the dark-brown hair was Phyledia Cauculis. She was a high-ranking noble who was a distant relative of the royal family of the Mech Kingdom of Marvelia. It made her enough of a big shot that it wouldn't be incorrect to refer to her as a princess. She had money, and she had power. Wonderful. She already had very sculpted features, but the contrast between her dark hair and pale skin was also beautiful. The bright white of her neck was so emphasized by the contrast with her hair that it took on a slight sexual appeal.

Phyledia was the fiancée that Zackford had mentioned. Oh, and she was the

weakest of the lot. And by weak, I meant that as a noblewoman, she hadn't had any need to train her body, so she was just a normal woman.

After we'd finished with introductions, we all sat ourselves around the fire, and Christo gave a brief explanation of how they knew each other. "Except for Crow, we're all the same age and will be graduating from the learning institute next year. Zack and Phyle will be getting married after that."

The learning institute in Vanderouge was essentially the same as the academy in Altoire. They'd all ended up as classmates, and Crowen had joined their friend group later on by being Christo's sibling. In other words, they were a happy little group of noble friends.

"Is this the first time a child hasn't been scared of you, Zack?" Phyledia teased, sending a smug smile to Zackford sitting beside her.

I see, so she's the kind who affectionately teases those she likes.

"Hey, give me some credit. At least two or three have been fine with me," he responded, as if offended.

So that's how their relationship is. Well, I'm glad they seem to get along.

Incidentally, Zackford's face really wasn't that scary. The natural way his eyebrows sat just made him look fierce and stern, as if he had a bit of trouble with social situations.

"Nia Liston... Are you that dog child? The one on magivision? Christo really likes your shows."

And then Crowen suddenly said something so mean. A "dog child" would imply something else entirely!

"Magivision, huh? I'd love to consider getting involved to assist with His Highness's reputation, but it's just so expensive," Zackford muttered, his face serious.

He was met with three different reactions. Phyledia took a drink of her wine, clearly disinterested, while Crowen looked completely unwilling to show any interest as if it all had nothing to do with her.

"The tech's crazy though. You'd get your money back in no time." The only

one with a relatively positive reaction was Christo. I wasn't sure whether to call him an optimist or just someone who didn't think that hard about things. Actually, no, that wasn't fair to him—his mind worked fast. Even if he looked frivolous and lazy, I could see he was really quite calculating.

"In what way would it even be profitable?" Zackford asked. "I can think of all sorts of benefits for the military, but that doesn't seem to be what Altoire's doing."

Honestly, I wanted to know the answer myself. In what way was it earning us profits? I didn't know the answer. I'd heard something about advertising fees once, but I barely had any idea how much money that made or how it was even being used.

"I'm curious too. I've heard plenty from Prince Hiero, but I'd much prefer to hear the opinion of someone simply working in the industry rather than a businessman actively trying to sell it to us," Crowen said.

As she said, I was a little curious about that too.

Wait...

Oh, she meant *me*. Hiero was the businessman; I was the performer. Before I realized it, everyone was suddenly looking right at me. Hiero wasn't saying anything, so it seemed like it was fine to give my thoughts. If it seemed like I was digging my own grave, I was sure he'd stop me.

"Since I'm a child, I'm not told the details, but I've heard that there's something like advertising fees."

"'Advertising'?"

"It's a way to inform people of your products or of a location or even of events. I think you've likely seen some of the advertisements already." I briefly explained Bendelio's show where he got to drink alcohol...well, his *Tales of a Liston Stroll* as an example.

He would drink alcohol on the program, and people would watch that program, become interested in the alcohol, and buy their own out of curiosity. These two systems were what turned a profit. There was likely more to it, but that was the extent of my knowledge.

"How it is used is also important. There is nothing better for spreading the word of, say, some new restaurant that's opened up, or some famous local specialty, or a play. In most cases, the advertisement comes with visual information. Even a little peek of what it looks like can get someone interested. 'A picture speaks a thousand words,' as they say."

Was that good enough? Hiero wasn't saying anything, so it seemed fine.

"Nia, are you not forgetting something important?"

Oops, no, it seemed I had forgotten something. What is it, Hiero? Please don't expect me to be able to use my brain.

"If it isn't too difficult for you, could you perhaps tell us about your upbringing?"

My upbringing? Oh... I saw what he meant. Nowadays, the whole of Altoire knew my story, but I'd started to forget it had ever happened.

"It may be a bit of a long story. Is that okay?"

And that was what led to me telling them the story of Nia Liston's life and how it had led to the Liston family choosing to participate in the magivision industry.

Three years—it had already been three years since I became Nia Liston. A lot had happened over that time, but in all honesty, all I could vividly remember right now was the chance I had recently been granted to use my martial arts to their fullest to hunt monsters these last three days and all of my magivision work. Oh, and my extreme hatred for Bendelio.

Beyond that, I remembered my detested homework as well. It was like an oil stain that constantly remained no matter how hard I tried to forget about it. What good did homework ever do anybody? What use was it? Numbers? *Eight-digit* numbers?! Those were a calamitous disaster even worse than an elite monster. I couldn't even begin to fathom the mind of whoever had invented them.

Forgetting humanity's worst invention for now, I told Zackford, Phyledia, Crowen, and Christo my story from the start: About how I had been bedridden

with what should have been a terminal disease. About how my parents had invested a massive sum of money into the magivision industry and introduced it to our territories in order to seek help from a wider audience. About how my life had been miraculously saved and I had now lived three healthy years.

"And that is the story of my upbringing. Though whether you can call it an 'upbringing' is debatable." At least now, they would understand why Nia Liston was so obsessed with magivision. "Excuse me." I had finished my tale, so I reached for the food that had been set on the coffee table in front of us. While I had been telling my story, a servant of the Huskitans had brought some sandwiches. *Ooh, the meat is so thick. How luxurious.* Incidentally, Lynokis was currently waiting in a different room with the driver of our skiff.

Everyone seemed to be deep in thought after I finished talking. "I see, so there is a possible benefit of being able to disseminate information through magivision..." Zackford eventually muttered to himself.

I was starting to understand why Hiero had asked me to tell my story. The history of Nia Liston was a moving story about the power of magivision that was overall quite simple. There were very few of these kinds of stories, what with how young the industry still was, but my story was no doubt one that frequently came up first.

Honestly, you could maybe even say it was the story that best represented the true benefits of magivision; it very efficiently showcased the potential of the technology. Plus, the four here had the honor of hearing the story right from the source—that had to leave a persuasive impact, however much I myself tended to forget what a terrible state I used to be in.

"Is your health much better now?" Phyledia asked.

I returned my half-eaten sandwich to my plate and nodded. "It is, thank you. I exercise frequently to ensure I will never lose to illness again. In fact, I'm so healthy I can even race dogs." I had even hunted so many monsters these past three days that I'd earned over one hundred and fifty million krams. I was in such good health that I'd have thought this was truly a perfect and enjoyable expedition if not for my loathed homework.

"Oh, this is what I'd been most curious about," Crowen spoke up. I'd reached

for my sandwich again, but I stopped in my tracks. "Why are you so fast? Never mind racing dogs, your speed in general is insane."

Wow, so there were those who viewed me in that light, after all? I was happy with people simply enjoying the show, but it seemed natural that there would be those who were seeing something else through those races.

Altoire as a whole was known for its naive peace, probably as an unfortunate side effect of the kingdom's ruling classes being so proficient. Domestically, no one who watched me was concerned with my strength. But in the eyes of many foreigners, there would be those who would immediately imagine what I would be like as their enemy—including a woman of the imperial family. I approved of her not being apathetic about it.

"I don't know what to tell you other than that it is the result of my training. I'm quite desperate to not fall ill again, so I've trained quite a lot." Personally, I still wasn't training anywhere near enough. If I'd had more free time, I would have absolutely been using it to train. There was no way this body could recreate my old martial arts as it was. I wanted to train more and I wanted to get stronger. I never wanted to have to deal with a terminal illness again.

"Why not challenge her to a race, Crow? You're pretty fast, aren't you?" Christo was laughing, but he had made quite the troublesome suggestion.

I had people sometimes challenging me to a race at the academy. I hadn't thought much of it when I took them on at first, but the moment the number of challengers became unmanageable, I'd started to refuse. Some of them had only become more insistent, so I'd had to shove the hassle off onto Sanowil Badr as a last resort, saying I'd only race them if they were faster than him. Since then, no one had come to challenge me to a race, and I was left alone. I was thankful for Sanowil—though I wasn't sure how he was handling them—especially since he never particularly came to me to complain.

From my own experience, people would become annoying whether they won or lost. At least with dogs, the most that would happen was that the animal would dislike me after, but with humans there was a large possibility that they would be left with resentment or a grudge. Not that the *owners* of the dogs were immune to that, admittedly.

"Don't bother." Before I could think of how to refuse her, Hiero was already rejecting the idea. Thank goodness he was willing to step in. It was only natural. Matches between those in the same country were already troublesome, but who knew what grudges would be born if it was between those of different nationalities? If we wanted things to end amicably, it wasn't something we should allow.

"Nia may look like a simple child, but she is undefeated in Altoire. Only pros who run for a living have any chance of beating her. You wouldn't even stand a chance."

I... I take that back.

Hiero was blatantly provoking her. He was fully intending to add fuel to the fire.

"Surely you're just exaggerating. I'm faster than you seem to think, you know? I'm confident I'm faster than any dog she's raced against on her program."

See? Look at what you've done. Crowen is raring for a fight now. Only the sore losers who were invested in martial arts but were still lacking in strength would so easily have their pride ruffled. As a fellow sore loser, I knew exactly where she was coming from, but I was most certainly not someone she should race; she would just end up hurting her pride.

"Unfortunately, Nia is *exceptionally* fast. Give up. She's out of your league. She's so fast she barely even seems human."

Yes, yes, listen to His Highness... Hm? For some reason, that didn't sound like much of a compliment... It didn't feel bad to be referred to that way, at least.

"Sounds like it could make for a fun match if you ask me. Crow, try and beat her," Phyledia egged her on out of morbid curiosity.

"I don't think you should." But the surprisingly mild-mannered Zackford put a stop to it.

Phyledia giggled. "Oh my, Zack, is this you saying you think Crow would lose?" "That's not what I mean. I just don't think anyone will be happy with the

result no matter who wins."

Exactly, he was spot-on. People who could be so easily provoked into matches were so annoying. If they lost, they'd keep pestering you for a rematch. If you held back to let them win, they'd get mad and tell you to take it seriously.

It was a pain, but...if Hiero wanted me to take the challenge, then I had no other choice. If he was taking this route, it had to mean he thought this was the best possible choice for our magivision efforts. Even if it meant there was a chance that Crowen would end up resenting me, I had to play my part in pushing Project Magivision forward, and if that meant choosing to take on a challenge, I would. There was no need to even weigh my choices.

"Fine, let's do it."

It appeared Crowen was already worked up; I hadn't even said yes or no yet.

"Now wait a second." And yet the cause of all this, Christo, stopped her. "If we make it a simple race with no stakes, it's practically a kids' game. Let's bet on it."

What?! Betting?! That's a surefire way to create a grudge if I ever saw one.

"Fine. Brother, you decide what we should bet."

Hey! Consider listening to what I want!

"Nia Liston is famous on magivision, so it's only logical that if you lose, you agree to assist with the introduction of magivision to Vanderouge."

What's logical about that? Not that it was a bad deal. Sure, I'd go with that.

"That's fine. Nia, if you win, I will talk to my father, His Imperial Majesty, about bringing magivision into the country. I'm not sure how much assistance I can give, but at the very least, I won't make things worse."

This had all progressed very suddenly, hadn't it? And without even once asking for my input. I was pretty sure Christo had aimed for this to happen too... These princes really were partners in crime.

You're definitely okay taking the bet with these conditions? I glanced at Hiero and he gave me a small nod. Good, I'll make sure to get the results you want.

"Then, regardless of victory or loss, let us have one single match," I said.

"I'm good with that. I'll even give you a handicap given our difference in size," Crowen said with a smirk.

"Really? How kind of you. Thank you very much." Whether I had a handicap or not, I was going to win, but it would give Crowen a good excuse; she would be able to state that she had lost without losing face. I wasn't very picky about the specifics of how I fought against someone I was guaranteed to win against.

"Shall we head outside?"

And so, with no sudden upset, I won the race.

Once the race was over and done with, though a grudge had been formed as I had expected, I was able to spend the rest of the day peacefully without any notable events. Crowen would sometimes direct a passionate gaze at me that was silently begging to have a rematch though. I guessed I'd ended up gaining another fan.

After that, I was told all manner of stories about the Empire of Flight, I spoke all about magivision, and I got to enjoy playing something called a "board game" that Vanderouge had created. Lose one hundred million krams due to a large business failure? It seemed it was my fate to deal with financial problems whether in a game or in real life...

"You're so cute. I'd love to have a daughter like you."

I wasn't sure why, but it seemed Phyledia really liked me, and she suddenly pulled me into her lap and began to stroke my hair. This would have likely driven Lynokis insane if she'd been there. I was glad she wasn't. I was so glad she was in a different room.



"But with Zack as their father, I'm sure they'll end up all tough and bulky."

"Hey, no one said that the kid wouldn't resemble you, Phyle."

"You think?" she replied. "I'd be okay with them resembling you though."

"Then there's only one answer: we simply have to keep having kids until we end up with at least one that looks like each of us."

Hm. I was fairly sure that this couple was wildly making out behind me. Or above me? In close range, at least. I was pretty sure their faces were touching. Could they not put me down first? Christo, Crowen, and Hiero were very graceful in their efforts to pretend they hadn't seen. The upper classes really were very good at ignoring that which they didn't want to see.

Still, whichever parent they resembled, their child would never beat my brother in cuteness. Though I wasn't so immature to say that out loud.

I would at least send well-wishes for a happy married life for the two of them.

Darkness fell over Vanderouge without a single appearance from the evening sun, the snow refusing to stop in the quiet air. It was still evening, but it was pitch-dark outside. I had stood up with Hiero when he remarked that he'd ended up staying for longer than intended. By then it was shortly before dinnertime.

"You should stay for dinner," Zackford implored. "I ordered some sword-deer meat. It's delicious, you know."

"Thank you for your consideration. It is a very tempting offer, but I'd like to get Nia home early," Hiero politely refused. "If you'll excuse me for today."

"Aw, you're taking her with you?"

Yes? Don't squeeze me like that.

"She's a busy girl herself. She'll be returning to Altoire tomorrow, so she needs to prepare."

I didn't need to get anything ready, but he was right that I would be returning home. Plus, I really wanted to get out of this position before Lynokis saw. If she

learned of this, she would end up throwing a tantrum. I could already hear her now, crying that she wanted to snuggle me too.

"What a shame. I was hoping we could sleep in the same bed tonight," Phyledia said with a pout.

Who said anything about that? Phyledia seemed like a polite princess on the surface, but she was surprisingly forceful, wasn't she? Even when we'd played the board game, she'd been the kind to choose someone as her target and never stop attacking, regardless of what place they were in.

"Perhaps the opportunity will present itself again. Good evening, Master Zackford, Mistress Phyledia." I was finally freed from her lap and freed from being forced to suffer the couple's flirtations at close range. I said my farewells to the lady who clearly wasn't hiding her reluctance and the man who was much calmer—all while thinking to myself that I'd likely never see these people again.

Then again, maybe it was a little early to say that. Once magivision was introduced into Vanderouge, we might end up crossing paths again.

"When we meet again, I'll challenge you to another race," Crowen said, her grudge more than apparent. "I'll train hard until then." I didn't think we'd have such an opportunity, but I nodded in acknowledgment anyway. If there were no developments on the magivision front, this would no doubt be the end of our communication.

"I'll head out with you both then. I can head straight back to the dorms," Christo said, deciding to come with us.

And so, my unexpected day at the Huskitans' drew to a close.

We met back up with Lynokis and were seen off by Zackford and the others as we all left in the skiff. The two princes sat on the side facing forward, while I faced them. Lynokis was in the passenger seat again. Like this, I could see the two boys' figures and expressions very easily.

"You managed to finish planting the seed, didn't you, Hiero?"

"Yup. Pretty sure that wedge is firmly in place. We were lucky we had Nia with us."

Excuse me?

"I don't think the timing could've been any more perfect. Phyle can be really picky about who she likes, so being that well received is *big*. Zack seemed to take it well too."

"That was honestly a surprise for me. I'd completely misjudged him—and I've never been happier to be wrong."

Hm...

"What is with your scheming little faces, hm?" I asked. I could tell they were planning something—in fact, they made no effort to hide it. Their smiles were both so very cunning. Anyone would find them suspicious, even a young child. I didn't know the details of their evil scheme though, so my only choice was to ask. Especially since it seemed as if they'd used me for whatever it was.

"It's not something we can talk about yet, but we may end up offering you some work soon."

Work?

"This is where the plan really starts, and I've got a very good feeling about it."

Yeah... I had no idea what they were on about. And neither of them seemed likely to elaborate, so I decided to stop thinking about it. It seemed like something I'd be involved with eventually, so I could just learn what it was then.

Perhaps the opportunity will present itself again.

When we meet again.

Casual promises that could barely be called promises were exchanged at that moment.

We may end up offering you some work soon.

This is where the plan really starts.

Words foreshadowing the future had been spoken by the two princes,

scheming expressions on their faces.

It wouldn't be long before what I thought were empty promises were fulfilled and I learned the truth behind the princes' plotting.

My encounters had been a wedge that I had unknowingly driven into the towering wall between Altoire and Vanderouge—forced in even deeper, even more secure, than ever before. The borders between our countries had been nothing more than a nuisance in the spread of magivision, but this day marked the beginning of the gradual destruction of that wall.

What I had done was take a small step. But that became the foothold that would allow the princes and their collaborators to follow, and what began as a small crack would lead to the complete crumbling of the divide. Great deeds began with small steps, sometimes without the person themselves even realizing what they'd set into motion.

I knew none of this at the time, of course, and once we were informed that the bad weather the following day would prevent us from doing any more hunting, we boarded a flight back to Altoire early, bringing our expedition to Vanderouge to an end.

At least...that was how I thought it would go. But in fact, something unexpected happened that very same night.

Chapter 6: Assault

"Not surprised," Oltar Ixas muttered after one of his men delivered a message to him.

It was a morning of harsh snow. The sky was bright, but visibility was low. Poor visibility had its advantages though. His old unit had often conducted covert operations, so bad weather could be quite fortunate for them.

He'd just received a message from the man currently in charge of the army's Ground Forces: the adventurer had not responded to their summons. Officially, this was now a matter for the secret enforcers—it was Oltar's to handle.

It's only natural, Oltar thought. He leaned against a wall and lit a cigar. Smoke flitted from his mouth as he pondered to himself.

Not even the whole might of the Imperial Army had been able to take down that blood cross crab, and yet someone had appeared who had done just that—by themselves too. This was an alarming situation. It was exceedingly unnatural. The fact that a *foreigner* had been the one to take the crab down only made everything much more suspicious.

Even assuming this situation had been allowed, there were endless questions: the biggest of all was how they had hunted it. The blood cross crab's shell was so thick that even hundreds of cannonballs had been unable to make a lethal strike. None of the poisons they had deployed had had any effect. When they used fire, it would escape into the sea. Traps were impossible due to its gigantic size.

The military had carried out many operations to try and take that monster down, but the one that had failed the most spectacularly was Operation Encroaching Flame. The plan had been to hold the crab down using numerous wires so it couldn't retreat to the sea, then set it on fire to roast it.

It had been the worst plan they'd ever tried. It had been so catastrophic that Oltar was exasperated by how they'd never noticed its blatant flaws.

The crab had simply escaped into the sea, dragging the hundreds of ships wired to it along with it. It had been a terrible failure. Then again, maybe they should be complimenting the crab for managing to not be brought down by so much weight. Painstaking calculations had been run in order to come up with that plan; what they had used should have been more than enough to keep it down.

In the end, they had run out of possible ways to defeat it, and they had had no choice but to adopt a policy of leaving the crab alone.

With that crab gone, they could explore the island. They could find the wreckages of airships and collect cargo or any other necessary items. Since it was still unexplored, there had to be undiscovered natural resources, as well. There had to have been enough for that crab to consume to get that big in the first place.

The more common blood cross crabs were nowhere near as big. They were a staple food, in fact. Regular crabs were quite delicious. That island must have been crawling with them. They'd thought if they could just get rid of the blood cross crab, they could go crab hunting. That island was a treasure trove of resources. The state had been so desperate to get access to it that they had carried out operations to attempt to take it down numerous times. But all of them had failed.

Despite all of that history, the one to finally take the blood cross crab down was some nameless foreign adventurer.

How?

It was a natural question. After examining both the crab and other monsters that adventurer had hunted, Oltar had come to one conclusion: they were using a special weapon. They had to have some sort of cannon that could be controlled by a single person.

Every monster that adventurer had hunted had been killed by a blunt blow. They had been bludgeoned in a way that didn't damage their coats or pelts. The blood had been removed from the monsters by butchers after the fact, which meant none of the lacerations had been caused by the adventurer.

If there had been cuts by their hand, Oltar would've been able to deduce both

their dominant hand and their weapon. If it was a known martial art, he would be able to track down their swordsmanship style. But blunt attacks were not something he could trace.

Bludgeoning was not a form of attack suited to hunting beasts in the first place. Their thick, elastic hides were resistant to direct impacts, even more so if the beast had fur. The bones underneath the skin were also strong. All Oltar could deduce was that the adventurer had precisely hit a lethal point to pulverize the bones or organs. With the understandable exception of the blood cross crab, they were killing these monsters with one strike.

Yet, even on the crab, there were marks of blunt strikes, ones much stronger than even cannon fire from an airship. A weapon that could wield this much firepower, and was usable by a single person, paired with the fact that the report had stated the adventurer apparently hadn't been holding any weapon of the sort... They had to have had a hidden weapon that was more powerful than regular artillery and could be stored and used by the individual alone. There was no way they could overlook the existence of such a secret weapon that could destroy even castles, rendering walls and buildings useless.

He had to look into them. How had that adventurer taken down the blood cross crab? What kind of weapon did they hold? And finally, what was the real reason they'd come to Vanderouge?

Were they truly a resident of Altoire? They weren't a spy of the Mech Kingdom, were they? Had they chosen Vanderouge as the country to test their weapon? In that case, why Vanderouge? Had they succeeded in their test? There were so many things he had to know.

If they'd refused to listen to the army's summons, then it was Oltar's turn to step in as one of the country's secret enforcers—as a guardian of this country.

"Young Mistress, I seem to be in a bit of trouble."

"I'm the one in trouble right now."

"There's only two questions left, right? You can do it!"

Yeah. Yeah, I'll do my best. But your cheering pisses me off...

Hiero and Christo had been kind enough to escort us back to the hotel first. It was incredibly humbling to be seen off by princes of both a royal and imperial family like that.

The weather today was atrocious, it was already late, and it was impossible to walk around Vanderouge due to the secrecy of my visit. We'd be boarding a flight to Altoire tomorrow, so there was nothing left to do. Except for my winter homework, that is, but even that would be done after I answered these last two questions. You disgusting pieces of paper...

In any case, that was how we were spending the last of our time in Vanderouge, cooped up in our hotel room after dinner. It was after one of the hotel staff came up to our room to talk to Lynokis that she had returned and said that she was in trouble. She'd conversed with them through the door, incidentally. She was still in her attendant's attire right now, after all.

"What's the problem?" I still had to finish those two questions, but I was much more curious about what Lynokis had to say. Was it something troublesome? Some kind of conflict? It wasn't something to do with Hiero, was it?

"It was a message from the adventurer's guild, a summons for Leeno. The reason they gave is that they apparently want to present me with the reward money for that big crab."

Certainly, that did sound suspicious.

"Cedony is supposed to be handling all of that, right? And that includes receiving the money," I noted.

"Precisely. The message was sent to the hotel directly from the guild as a matter of utmost importance. The fact it hasn't gone through Cedony first makes it all the more unusual."

We had relied on Cedony for support in absolutely everything during our trip. That was why this all felt so strange. If the message had come from them, then at least we could trust it. There was the fact that it wasn't just a simple notice to pass along but an urgent summons that was immediately brought up to us by the hotel staff.

There had to be a reason the guild wanted to have a meeting with Leeno without Cedony's interference. It couldn't be anything else.

"Can't you just ignore it?"

"If I do, we may not get the bounty. That's twenty million krams, remember?" Right, that was the reason they'd stated.

"Is the adventurer's guild always so vague with matters like this?" Were there cases of one having their reward revoked because of some perceived fault with their actions? A guild was an association—I was under the impression that they were quite well managed.

"There are a lot of cases where there are unspoken rules, like what to do if you stole someone's hunt, or if you took down an injured monster and it turned out to be one a different adventurer had been hunting. Those types of potential conflicts that can't be solved with the written rules tend to involve silent agreements. It's necessary to prevent fights from breaking out."

That made sense. There had to be many cases where the standard rules simply didn't apply, so unspoken rules to prevent arguments would naturally develop among the adventurers.

"The biggest problem is that Leeno is not of Vanderouge nationality. Being a foreign adventurer, there are things that could happen to us that would be overlooked. The stealing of one's bounty money...while rare, I do not think would be impossible."

"I'd really like to know why they're calling you out. The only thing I can think of is that they want to retract the money." Twenty million krams was apparently a lot of money, after all. Would it be so strange for someone to try and go after it?

"That does seem possible, but I think it could also be the case that they want to curry favor with me. We did raise over a hundred million krams over these past few days. That makes twenty million look like spare change in comparison."

In other words, they might be trying to poach her. That also seemed possible.

"Then will you ignore it? Surely you can pass up twenty million." Especially now that I knew how quickly we could generate money, giving up twenty million to avoid trouble seemed cheap... Sort of. Well, maybe not *cheap*, but it was an acceptable amount to lose. We were supposed to be here in secret—avoiding unnecessary trouble was of the utmost importance.

"We came here to earn money, but you wanted the name of Leeno to gain a reputation as well, didn't you? If we ignore this summons, there may be rumors that I ran from the guild. I wouldn't complain about that outcome though. As far as I'm concerned, my work as an adventurer is little more than a side job. I'd be willing to stop at any time."

No, that can't happen.

"Your fame will be what pulls people to the martial arts tournament; it has even more value than the money, if you ask me. In this situation, if we run away, the debt will be huge."

If we were in Altoire, that would be fine; we could make up for one or two failures. But this was Vanderouge. Trying to make up for any mistakes we made here would be next to impossible—we had no plans to do any further work here. That blemish would remain, unmovable.

"In other words, I have no choice but to go? Even though this all just sounds like trouble?"

"I'll go instead if you really don't want to. It seems fun."

We'd missed out on our last day of hunting, so I had pent-up energy that I still hadn't been able to burn. It was like I had lingering regrets. If I had the opportunity to go a little wild, then I would absolutely love to take it. There might be a surprisingly strong foe, after all.

Lynokis stared at me for a while, and then as if reading my thoughts, she said, "I'll go. The last thing I need is for things to get worse."

Okay then. I guessed I'd be sitting this one out. It was true we couldn't risk my cover being blown, and I couldn't be bothered to dye my hair again until tomorrow morning. This expedition was to be done in secret—I should avoid being in public as much as possible. Lily no longer had a role to play.

"I'll head off then. I shouldn't be too long."

Lynokis changed into her disguise and left.

I was pretty sure she could handle almost anyone nowadays, and if the situation looked bad, I was sure she'd run right away. I didn't think there was any need to worry. And so I returned to my homework, excitedly waiting for what tales she had to tell when she returned.

"You'd like to know the location of the adventurer's guild?"

"Yes, please. I have to make a quick visit."

Lynokis—well, more precisely, Leeno—had been called out to the central branch of the adventurer's guild of Vanderouge. After confirming the location with the receptionist at the hotel, she headed on her way. The strong winds had died down, and the snow had also calmed. At least the weather didn't seem like it would be terrible tonight.

Lynokis crunched her way through the snow on the empty main street. The bad weather and time of day meant that very few of the shops were open, though it was still too early to sleep. It didn't take long before she spotted a building with its lights on. The fact it was operating even with this weather made it seem even more likely it was a gathering place for adventurers. Adventurers were essentially day laborers, so time and weather were irrelevant to them.

After checking with the sign to confirm she was at the right place, she headed inside.

Inside there were over twenty people—all of them weathered adventurers who looked used to rough matters—sitting at their own tables. Altoire's guild had tables as well, but it had more of an office feel to it. Here, it felt like a local pub on the inside. With both the stuffy air and the smell of food and drinks, the place felt lived-in. Things seemed to be pretty lively too—until Lynokis turned up, that is.

The moment she opened the door, the bustle came to a stop, and the rudely evaluating gazes of the adventurers inside turned to her. No one particularly

looked all that challenging here, regardless, so it didn't faze her much. It would be different if any of them looked anywhere near as strong as Anzel, Fressa, or Gandolph. If they were this weak, they could pick fights with her all they wanted, they would never—

"Hey there, lady, you new here? C'mon and have a seat; we'll give you some good pointers." As Lynokis weaved her way through the tables to the counter, a rowdy middle-aged man caught her arm. She looked at him and frowned.

"Are you so desperate to flirt with girls that you'd degrade yourself like this? What a boring man," she said darkly.

The meaning hidden in her words was obvious. *Don't act like some third-rate adventurer*.

This man was quite the veteran. Given his age, he was likely good at his job too. He wasn't some beginner that didn't know better than to recklessly lay a hand on someone new.

But that was exactly why his actions made no sense. Skilled adventurers had to get on well with those around them to survive. Both as an adventurer and in a life-or-death situation, the better they were, the less they did careless things like this. They should be painfully aware of the dangers of meddling with someone without knowing who they really were.

Lynokis's words made the man smile for a different reason. "Yeah...you ain't normal, are ya? My bad. Lemme get you a drink as an apology."

"Sure. I'll take one once I'm done here," Lynokis replied as she headed for the counter. The gazes of the adventurers were watching her the whole way. She was sure...

"Are you Leeno?" the lady at reception asked.

She was sure that everyone here right now knew exactly who would be coming here. They knew that Leeno, the adventurer who had come from a neighboring country and made her name raising over one hundred million krams in less than a week, would be coming here to the guild at this time. The man's actions were a form of test on behalf of everyone present: Was she the real thing? And if she was, just how strong was she?

She wasn't a fresh-faced adventurer, so if she'd ended up flustered from that alone, they would almost certainly have looked down on her. Then again, looking at her adventuring history, she technically was still a new adventurer...

Regardless, depending on how they tried to test her, she could've taken them all down easily. Vanderouge wasn't about to become their main base of operations, so it wouldn't have been such a big deal to leave with a bit of an incident on her record. The most important thing was for her to not leave known as a coward.

"Please come this way."

The receptionist guided her up the back of the guild.

The moment she entered the simple meeting room, a lot of things fell into place.

"Thank you for coming all this way. Please have a seat."

Waiting for her was a burly man who looked very much like an adventurer. He introduced himself as Avalan, and he was the guildmaster of Eunesgo's adventurer's guild. Bits of gray were dotted about his dark-brown hair, and he likely hadn't been retired for very long. He still looked very strong.

But the one who stood out wasn't him—it was the nobleman sitting beside him.

"Are you Leeno? How did you kill that crab?" He was a middle-aged man wearing exceedingly regal attire, yet there was also a real air of danger emanating from him, a type of danger different from that of a rough adventurer's. This was a type of villain who knew how to wield his authority, rare to find in Altoire. It was the kind of danger you would feel from one who ruled and lived in the underworld.

He was very similar to the aristocrat that she had met with in order to sneak her way into the Umbral Arena all those months ago. Even back then, her instincts had been screaming at her that it would be dangerous to get involved with them.

This meeting had to have been set up by that nobleman. Either he was

exerting pressure on the guild, or he was working with the guildmaster.

"Excuse me, but may I ask who you are?" Lynokis asked. Avalan had introduced himself, but not this man.

"That's none of your concern." It was an intimidating answer. "Or are you that desperate to know?"

The question gave Lynokis pause. If she learned who he was, that would mean that she was involved with him. If she remained clueless, she could walk away and pretend this had never happened. That had to be the meaning behind his question.

Lynokis was a resident of Altoire—she wasn't so frightened by the thought of a Vanderouge noble having their eye on her. If worse came to worst, she had plenty of connections to get her out of her mess: the fourth-class Liston family, genuine pure-blooded royalty through Hildetaura, and even a knowledgeable underworld informant in Anzel. She even had Nia, the strongest possible supporter... No, if possible, Lynokis didn't want to have to rely on her. As the most beloved disciple, she didn't want to cause trouble for her most beloved master.

"An adventurer's weapons and tactics are their tools of the trade. It is not something I can supply to those I barely know."

"Really now. My identity aside, you can tell my status, can't you?"

Are you going to ignore a question from a noble? was what he was trying to say.

"Unfortunately, I am a citizen from Altoire. I have no obligation to abide by the hierarchy of this country." She wasn't going to pick a fight, but neither was she going to simply listen to whatever he said. This man was most definitely trying to pull Lynokis to his side. If he weren't, he wouldn't be here. "Besides, class differences are minimal in this day and age, no?"

That was why she decided she would take control of the conversation. The moment he tried any funny moves, she would leave the room and escape Vanderouge, before it could turn into a full-blown fight. She'd be able to figure something out if she could just get back to Altoire.

"Certainly, this era does not grant nobles the power to take direct action against those of foreign nationality. If we did, you would most certainly find yourself in trouble later. At worst, it would become an international incident. That does not mean I don't have several *indirect* methods, however."

He could use his connections, or he could use the law, presumably. All he had to do was forge a crime. The courts would trust their own people more than the foreigner. It being an accusation from a noble would make it even more of a case they couldn't ignore.

"To begin with..." The man calmly crossed his legs. "You have a clear weakness. I believe it is in your best interests to settle this matter through negotiation."

A clear weakness. The moment Lynokis realized what he meant, she stood right up from her seat.

"Did you dare lay a hand on her?!"

The man showed no change in expression. In other words...he had.

"This...is bad!" Lynokis was visibly concerned.

"Sit down. If you don't, you won't like what'll happen." But the man had interpreted her distress incorrectly. An adventurer with a child would obviously have that child as their weakness. The man had likely sent an assassin to their hotel in order to kidnap said weakness...

Except no, Lynokis was not worried that Nia had been kidnapped. She was worried that Nia would cause a commotion.

Lynokis took a deep breath and then sat back down. She didn't know the current situation. She had to bide her time until she did. It would be very easy for her to leave this man bloodied and bruised and return to the hotel. Yes, incredibly simple. Sure, there was the powerful man beside him who had climbed his way up to being guildmaster, but that didn't matter. She could just beat them both up together. Even that would be simple.

But what would happen when she returned? What if Nia had already caused a scene? If Lynokis returned, she could end up unintentionally adding fuel to the fire. She was fairly positive the man had in fact sent an assassin. If it was simply

for show, or done on a whim, or even to simply make himself known, he wouldn't have prepared a meeting like this.

How would Nia deal with the assassin? It was because Lynokis didn't know that she couldn't act. It was possible that she'd retaliate, but it was just as possible that she'd let herself get kidnapped to figure out their intentions or because it "seems fun." Whichever of these she'd choose, she would probably try to handle it as quietly as possible. She didn't want to cause trouble any more than Lynokis did.

The problem came if she chose any other plan. The way the assassin began their assault would definitely change how Nia would deal with them. If they were sneaky about it, then Nia would also be sneaky about it. If they weren't, then...

"Do you understand the situation you're in? You have no choice but to listen to what I say. Don't worry, if you act nice, we'll get your kid back to you safe and sound."

That wasn't what she was worried about. There was no one in this world who had any hopes of laying a hand on Nia. Her biggest worry was that this would turn into an international incident. It was something so important to avoid that Lynokis was even willing to repress the urge to run off right this second. They absolutely could not allow it to happen.

If they messed up here, they'd cause trouble for Prince Hiero after all his help getting them into Vanderouge, and it would throw a wrench into the promotion of magivision in the country, as well. That would be a massive stain on the Listons' record.

If Lynokis wasn't careful about how she acted, everything could become even worse.

Please, I beg of you, don't cause any trouble.

All she could do now was pray.

"Hm?" After Lynokis left to address that positively thrilling-sounding summons, I finished off my homework. It was when I was about to go make

myself some tea that I suddenly felt three presences. "They're quite inexperienced, aren't they?" I muttered.

Whoever they were, they were moving in the direction of our room, running fast but with feet light enough to erase any sound. "Third-rate assassins" was the only way I could describe them. Their stealth was pathetic.

Who was their target? If they passed by my room, then... Wait, we're the only ones who should be staying on this floor. The second prince of Altoire himself had arranged the rooms, after all; the extravagant price meant there were few who could afford it, so right now, we were the only ones on this level.

This isn't good. Realizing what was coming next, I frantically dug into the bag where I kept my Lily disguise. I quickly changed into my training dogi, tied my hair up in a simple bun, and shoved a black wig over my head. I was glad I had prepared it just in case; I could change my clothes, but my hair would stand out no matter what.

There was a knock just as I finished shoving my Nia Liston dress into my bag—a knock on the door to this room.

"Coming." I'd gotten changed just in time. I gave myself one last check in the mirror, adjusted my wig, and then stood in front of the door. "Who is it? Leeno is currently out," I called without opening the door.

A man replied with "Room service ordered by Miss Leeno."

One stood in front of the door flanked by one more on either side. *Hm... I* think I'm starting to see what's going on. They had come here perfectly aware that Leeno wouldn't be present, probably to search for something they could use to blackmail her. Their number one target was likely me.

It didn't seem like there were very many adventurers in this day and age who could earn a hundred million krams in just a few days. It was only natural those who wanted to get their hands on such a money tree would start to pop up. That was what Lynokis had been thinking and I agreed with her.

Now, what to do...? I could invite them in and beat them to a pulp, but getting kidnapped sounded quite exciting in its own right. Getting a chance to talk with the mastermind could be fun. I'd make sure he compensated us for wasting our

time.

At least, that's what I would very much like to do, but it wasn't such a good idea right now. I was supposed to be here in secret, and since I was technically here on invitation from Hiero, I couldn't afford to cause any trouble. If we were connected to any incidents, the prince would end up in trouble by association.

As a commoner, Lynokis wouldn't suffer too much, but I was the daughter of the Liston family. I often ended up associated with people in high places in the most unexpected ways. Perhaps more accurately, I was *forced* to be associated with them. There was always the possibility someone could take advantage of those relationships for political purposes; even a small blemish could lead to a large scandal. That was what it meant to cause conflict with a foreign country. If I caused problems here, it could turn into an international incident.

The upper echelons of Vanderouge were more than aware that Nia Liston was in their country. To most who saw me, I was simply Lily, but all you had to do was a little digging and you'd find out my true identity. In other words, all I had to do was deal with them without leaving a single trace of my movements. I needed to take them out without letting anyone see, moving from darkness to darkness. I could probably leave them alone, but they'd come all this way—it was only polite for me to treat guests kindly.

All right, plan decided.

Just as I'd decided on my plan of action, I heard the men consulting from behind the door.

"She isn't opening the door."

"Has she caught on to us?"

"I'm done waiting. Break it open."

Hey, hold your horses there. Impatient one, aren't you? I quickly grabbed any bags we had brought with us. I was lucky we'd already prepared our luggage for our flight the next morning. If we ended up losing some smaller things, it was fine, but I at least made sure I'd grabbed everything important.

I opened the window and, while narrowing my eyes against the piercing, cold wind, I put my foot on the frame and began climbing up, bags in hand.

"Up we go!" Using the small window frame as a foothold, I hoisted myself up. The roof was...a little far, so I decided to hide above the window for now—it would be a pain to make it all the way up there with our luggage.

"Oh no."

Crap, my wig's falling off. Did it catch on something...? Never mind. Leaving it to sit on my head off-kilter would look unnatural, so I decided to shove it away instead.

That little hiccup aside, I managed to settle myself against the wall just above the window, ready and waiting. I'd be caught if they looked up, but if that happened, I'd simply beat them up. If I managed to make it without being caught, then I'd try tailing them. I'd very much like to know who they were, after all.

Not long after, the door opened.

"Where'd the kid go?!"

"She ain't here!"

"The window's open!"

Two of the men popped their heads out the window and looked down.

"Did she jump from all the way up here?"

"No way. This is the seventh floor, you know."

"Then...where'd the kid go?"

"They must've guessed something like this would happen and made sure to prepare an escape route."

"Would make sense. A skilled adventurer would be prepared for any situation."

The men pulled their heads back into the room and closed the window. They were lucky. If they'd showed any sign of looking up, I'd have launched an attack right away.

"Hurry and search outside!"

After doing a quick once-over of the hotel room, the men left. The moment

the door closed, I opened the window and flung all the bags and my wig back in. The door is...definitely shut, right? They didn't break the lock or anything?

"All right, let's go."

Lynokis had said she had been called to the adventurer's guild. She was likely being threatened by the person who had called her out, saying that I had been kidnapped. Those men had to have been here to make good on that threat, no doubt about it. And Lynokis should be aware that it was impossible for them to succeed. In that case, she had likely chosen to sit and observe.

Aware that her own actions could lead to the Liston family being held responsible, she was likely staying put. There was no reason to worry about my safety, so she was able to wait it out. At least, I was sure she had to be thinking that. It was impossible for me to completely predict her actions, but there was one thing I knew for certain, and that was that Lynokis knew I wouldn't simply stand by under these circumstances. So she'd likely try to match whatever I chose to do.

And that meant she was waiting for me to make my move. I thought. Probably.

If she was thinking that, she was right—I would not, in fact, remain still.

"To think my last hunt of this trip would be humans. Well, something like this isn't so bad now and again."

I stood on the window frame once more—and leaped.

The men who had broken into the hotel room ran around the perimeter for a while, before eventually giving up and leaving. I tailed them from a suitable distance...high above them.

I ran and jumped between buildings, sometimes running along walls, just to swiftly follow along with the men.

Hm? They stopped. What are they discussing? I slowly neared them.

"You're saying I should go?"

"Yes, so go already. Tell him we failed to nab the kid."

"Tch, fine."

They must be reporting to whoever ordered them to do this in the first place. Communication was very important, after all.

One of them split up from the other two in the middle of the narrow alley. "Gah?!"

Once they were separated enough that they'd lost sight of each other, I leaped down from above and knocked out the messenger. *Come now, no need to be in a rush. The night is long, after all. Sleep here for now.*

I quickly climbed back up the wall and continued to pursue the other two—it took no time at all to catch up. They were walking slowly, likely because they didn't expect they were being tailed.

Now, how should I take these two down, hm?

"Oh?" Their destination was fairly close. It was an average-sized building a little way into the main street, about four stories high. The first floor looked to be an upscale restaurant that was still open, but the men used the external stairs to go up to the second floor.

It was obvious what the first floor was, but what about the rest? Were they living quarters? Or were they the offices for the restaurant? Whatever the case, I might as well take everyone in the building down. They were the ones who'd picked a fight first; why should I hold back? I might end up involving some unrelated people, but that wouldn't be my fault—it was the fault of the ones who'd attacked me for using such a public place. I'd show them that sometimes the world was just that unreasonable.

Well...I'd at least exclude the restaurant. It looked like they had regular customers as well. That was a bit *too* unrelated for my liking.

I silently dropped to the ground, climbed the outer stairs, and stood in front of the door.

I grabbed the knob of the door without hesitation and tried to twist it, but it caught. It was locked? Fine.

I forcefully twisted it and the door opened with a snap.

"I wonder how many are waiting for me."

The more the merrier, but I'd put up with less.

What awaited me when I entered was a large room. There were sofas, tables, and a kitchen—it seemed like an area for a large group of people to remain on standby. The scent of alcohol and cigarettes filled the room. The space was overflowing with miscellaneous items, newspapers bundled up together. Weapons like swords hung on the walls. Were they simply decorative? No, given their luster, they might have been the real deal.

This must have served as the entranceway to the upper floors of the building. Those men I'd seen earlier weren't here, so they must have gone to the back, maybe to the higher floors.

"Hey, who left the door open? It's freezin' in here. Get it shut."

The first had been dozing on a sofa. He'd woken up when the wind hit him, but I knocked him back out with a fist.

"Oh my..." I observed the man. He most certainly didn't look like a civilian, not with that build. It was a bit of an insult to call him a thug, but it didn't seem right to call him a mafioso either—his body was too trained for that. He seemed more like a martial artist.

I couldn't quite pinpoint what he was, but he definitely wasn't a law-abiding citizen. He had to be part of the underworld. In which case, I could go all out.

There were six people on this floor and about eight above. I'd need to be careful to avoid being spotted, but I didn't think that would be much hassle.

Let's get these guys dealt with so Lynokis can rest easy.

"Hm?"

Oltar felt something strange.

The former soldier, who in the moment was acting as a civilian, was also a hired manager for the restaurant on the first floor. He was a large man with an intimidating face, so he couldn't work out on the floor, but he carried out a

variety of tasks in the back. He had been hired by an old noble friend who owned the establishment.

It was as he was cleaning up some paperwork in his office that he felt the odd sensation and lifted his head up. His boss, Grieg Klett, should've been meeting with Leeno. And by now, the child who traveled with Leeno should've been kidnapped by his men.

Oltar had been sitting ready to jump straight into action if anything happened. He had men on lookout, so if they spotted anything strange, they would report straight to him. He could've tagged along on either mission, but he'd chosen to remain on standby where he was so he'd be able to immediately respond to an incident from either side.

That was when he had felt the strange sensation.

It was a quiet night. Nothing had made a sound and nobody had come to call on him. He hadn't even felt a suspicious presence. And yet it was like...there was *something*. Was it the instincts that he had built up from his experience as an army man?

If it was, those instincts had been right.

It was a quiet night. Unknown to Oltar, just beyond the door there was an intruder clad in the silence of that night.

Oltar unconsciously pulled out the knife hidden in his drawer and stood. He couldn't detect anyone's presence. He shouldn't have needed a weapon. And yet for some reason, his instincts were screaming that he should arm himself.

It was a quiet night. So quiet that you could practically hear the sound of the snow falling outside. Oltar quieted his breathing and crept towards the door...

"Gwah?!"

Until he was knocked back by a strong impact.

"Tch!" After somehow managing to catch himself before he slammed right into the wall, Oltar scrambled back to his desk and hid behind it.

He had no idea what the hell had happened, but what was more than apparent was that an enemy had attacked him. That was all he needed to know.

Oltar swiftly pulled his harness from the drawer where he kept it and attached it to himself. It held his main weapons—throwing knives—and he fluidly threw one up towards the lights hanging from the roof, hitting them with precision and covering the room in darkness.

Darkness was his friend. There was no such thing as a sapper without good eyes for the dark.

It was a quiet night. So quiet that you could practically hear the sound of the snow falling outside. Hiding in the shadow of his desk, Oltar continued to observe the room, his breathing silent. His eyes finally became accustomed to the darkness thanks to the slight light filtering in through the window.

And then, the door opened. Just...opened. There was no wavering behind the movement.

"Hmph!"

The moment he detected the motion, Oltar threw a knife while remaining hidden behind the desk. He couldn't sense anything, so there was no way for him to identify a real target. But his lifelong partner had never once missed.

Still remaining in the shadows cast by the desk, he struck to the right, above the desk, to the left, throwing out knives one after another.

Then suddenly, Oltar stopped with a sharp intake of breath—a knife he had just thrown flew right back at him, in front of his eyes. What unfathomable skill. Though Oltar had been moving around with no rhyme or reason, his attacker had thrown that knife with precise aim—precise enough that it would definitely miss him.

The attacker had deliberately missed, Oltar could tell. It was a warning that they could hit him at any time—but his guard was up so high that being hit shouldn't be feasible. Oltar still couldn't even detect the enemy.

But his opponent was the opposite.

"Wh-Who are y—?!" His voice trembled as he tried to ask for their identity, but then he stopped.

They were there.

Right behind him.

That knife was just a decoy, just a way to keep him in place.

Their real goal was...



And that was Oltar's last thought before the darkness overtook him.

"So who are they, really?" the intruder pondered to herself after knocking Oltar unconscious. His movements during his brief attempt at a counterattack had been far too skilled to be a simple thug's and his hostility had been too clean to make him one of those mafioso who specialized in killing. He looked like he might be an assassin, but then the quality of the hostility still wasn't quite right. Someone who did that for a living tended to have a sort of hostility that was thinner and weaker but still very sharp.

"Suppose it doesn't matter at the end of the day."

She wouldn't be able to find an answer, but it hadn't been an opponent worth fighting. He wasn't bad, but his strength, as good as it was, remained within the realm of the normal. The moment she made that assessment, she'd had enough.

The intruder left the room.

Even after all that, the night remained quiet.

"This must be my goal."

In the back of the fourth floor there was an office with luxurious furnishings. This was the end. This had to be the office of the leader of those using this building as a stronghold. I'd knocked out all the mafiosi I'd run into on the way here, so the only one moving right now was me.

In short, I'd successfully gained total control of the building.

It was a simple job. I'd gone around taking them out without being spotted, but it had been so easy that it wasn't all that fun. I'd imagined there'd be at least a couple moments that were more dangerous, but nope. I'd just gone around doing my business. Well...there was one person who'd noticed me, but he'd ended up not being as strong as I'd hoped.

It wasn't such a big deal, I supposed. It wasn't as if I'd been expecting much from them in the first place.

"Grieg Klett?"

I searched the desk and found some signed documents. The name that most often cropped up was Grieg Klett. This must have been his office, which meant he was the one who had called upon Lynokis and also tried to kidnap me.

Klett... The name was unfamiliar to me. Judging by the lavish furniture in the room, he had to either be rich or a noble.

I decided to continue looking around the room to see what else I could find. There were various bits and bobs around the room as was common for an office, but what immediately caught my eye was an expensive cabinet containing appropriately expensive alcohol inside. It had to be some high-end stuff. It was a spectacular sight. I wanted to drink some. Surely just one sip would be fine?

No, no. If I have one sip, I'll never be able to stop. I decided to do my utmost to never look in that direction.

What else was there?

My gaze stopped on a bookshelf. There was a row of books with extravagant spines neatly lined up, yet just one book appeared to not fit so cleanly, what with the way it was sticking out. Or had someone not put it away properly once they were done?

Something felt strange. I couldn't stop looking at it. I tried pulling it out and... "Bingo."

Right enough, there was something behind it. I took out the other books surrounding it and discovered a small hidden safe built into the wall. It was a bit of a stereotypical hiding place, no? I had no key, so naturally, I forced it open with pure strength.

Iron and steel are useless against me. If you really want to keep me out, you should at least try to get one made of divine iron or magic steel. Not that that would stop me either.

"Some cash and jewelry. Documents. Are these receipts? This is definitely a ledger." Though I should have expected as much from such a small safe, there was only the bare minimum inside. I skimmed through the ledger, and it was filled with numbers. If it was important enough to store in a safe, it was possible

it might be one for shady dealings, but I felt absolutely no desire to dig further. Get those numbers out of my sight.

The documents appeared to be deeds to the land and a restaurant—he must have been the owner of the one on the first floor. These papers were definitely important at least.

The money and jewelry could be traceable if stolen, so I chose to leave them behind. All I took were the ledger and documents. The last thing I needed was something good and heavy... Most of the objects in the office seemed to be antiques, so I didn't really like the idea of using them; they were the cumulation of a craftsman's blood, sweat, and tears, after all.

That frying pan in the hall on the second floor would be perfect.

All right, let's beat it.

"Are you messing with me?"

"No?"

"Then I'll ask you again. How did you take down that massive crab?"

"Just a little punch and a kick. My answer won't change no matter how many times you ask. It's the truth."

The man, Grieg Klett, was clearly getting frustrated. On the other hand, Lynokis remained totally calm. Sitting beside them, the guildmaster, Avalan, was decidedly doing nothing.

Due to his position and their difference in status, he had no power to defy Grieg. This wasn't simply his own problem; if he dared defy him, he could end up putting all of Vanderouge's adventurers in danger. He couldn't act carelessly. However, that did not mean he would immediately take Grieg's side either. As such, he was simply observing—observing and doing nothing else. That was the most he could do in this situation.

"I am not the most patient man. I advise you to watch your words."

"You may threaten me all you wish but I cannot give you a different answer. I've been telling you the truth this whole time."

Lynokis understood herself how difficult to believe it was—but she had seen Nia fight the crab with her own eyes. She had seen it with her own eyes and yet even now, a part of her couldn't believe what she had witnessed. That gigantic monster had slowly come apart more with each of Nia's attacks. Was that even possible for a human? She'd questioned it, despite it unfolding before her.

The truth was immovable, however. It was impossible to believe, but it was undoubtedly the truth. Even if the man across from her did not believe it, Lynokis had nothing else she could say.

"Do you not care what happens to the child?"

"Now, don't say that. Please don't hold me responsible for your refusal to believe me." Lynokis wasn't worried about Nia whatsoever. She was worried about how long she should be continuing this farce. Nia was definitely safe at the very least, so for now, she would continue stalling for time.

But the resolution arrived much faster than she anticipated.

It was all very sudden. The adventurer's guild shook with a loud boom.

"What's going on?!" Even Avalan couldn't help but be shaken. He jumped to his feet and immediately dashed out of the room, most likely to check on everyone. His time as an adventurer had made him quick to react to emergency situations.

He immediately came back, holding a leather bag that fit under his arm.

"What is going on, Avalan?"

"It was...a delivery."

"A delivery?"

"For you, Mr. Klett, sir."

Avalan placed the bag on the table.

"You'd better open it as soon as possible. For your sake."

"Hm...?" Grieg quizzically checked the inside of the bag as he'd been told. "A...frying pan?" The first thing he pulled out was a large, bent frying pan. It looked like a sturdy iron pan, yet it had been completely mangled.

But with the next object, Grieg's complexion blanched.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, his sharp gaze directed right at Avalan.

The guildmaster simply shrugged. "Apparently it was thrown into our wall. Caused a big hole, as well."

"It was *thrown*...? I will be taking my leave!" Grieg picked up the leather bag and left the room without even a glance at Lynokis, leaving behind nothing but the mangled frying pan.

"Evidence of that man's misdeeds was inside," Avalan explained. It was at that moment that Lynokis knew this had been Nia's action. Not that she had expected anything less.

It had been a message from Nia: "I broke into this guy's base. Everything's all right now so come back." If she'd gone as far as it seemed she had, that man would be forced to deal with the aftermath for his own protection. He didn't have time to deal with Lynokis anymore.

At least, for now.

In any case, with the man gone, Lynokis had no reason to remain at the adventurer's guild.

"If you'll excuse me."

"Real sorry for the hassle. Nearly got you involved in trouble even though you're not an adventurer of this country."

The guildmaster had been unable to move as he wished due to the pressure of someone in power. Being of a commoner background herself, Lynokis knew exactly how that felt. She sympathized with Avalan and placed no blame on him whatsoever.

"Consider this a debt to repay." Her empathy was exactly why she said those words. I'll give you the chance to make up for this, so don't worry about it.

"Please transfer the bounty for the crab to Cedony Trading. Now, once more, if you'll excuse me."

There had been a bit of a commotion right at the very end, but with this, their excursion to Vanderouge had finally concluded.

An Elegant Day in Helena Rhyme's Life—and What Lay Behind It

This is Helena Rhyme, wife of Jaurès Rhyme, third-class aristocrat. As one with royal blood, she learned the etiquette of the upper classes from a young age, and though she is now in her fifties, those lessons have yet to leave her. Now, she teaches such etiquette to children, and her tutelage is in high demand among aristocrats.

Her husband is currently a high-ranking official of the royal court, working tirelessly to support the Kingdom of Altoire from both the light and the shadows.

We shall follow an elegant day in the life of Mrs. Helena Rhyme as a woman living in the upper classes. But stay tuned: the true purpose of this program shall be revealed in the second half.

Mrs. Rhyme's mornings start early.

"I like to believe I'm young at heart, but unfortunately, my body cannot quite keep up."

Early to bed, early to rise, she ensures she lives as regimented a life as possible.

"I have always taken great care of my health and beauty, but when you reach my age, you are made painfully aware that one's health is the most difficult, but most important, thing for one to achieve."

Her days always begin with a glass of juice made from ten different fruits and vegetables.

"I have been drinking this every day for the past five years. It is thanks to this that I have not had any major health problems."

Having greatly enjoyed the vegetable juice served at the café of one of the local greengrocers years ago, she requested the recipe and then had her own

cook prepare it for her every morning. If you put great care into your beauty and health, then we recommend you visit the Season of Fruit and Leaves café on Second Street. As they use fresh produce, there is a rich flavor to their food and drinks that gives a fresh and different appeal to vegetables. Their white-carrot steak is especially popular.

Following a leisurely morning bath, it's time for Mrs. Rhyme's breakfast.

"I usually have breakfast with my husband."

As Master Jaurès is a state official, we were unable to get permission to record him. The breakfast they usually eat as a pair is a light meal consisting of freshly baked bread, salad, and soup. Though there could be some variations, apparently this is their usual breakfast menu.

"I have work after this, so in the mornings, I don't eat enough to be full. However, I do personally believe that to eat is to live. Even having something light in the morning allows you to approach your day with vigor."

After finishing her breakfast and getting dressed, a guest appears—a small aristocratic child. Mrs. Rhyme will now show off her mettle as an etiquette tutor.

Many of her clients are young children who have not even begun schooling at the academy yet. Her policy is to be strict with children's etiquette at a young age so they can be exemplary role models in the future. Due to various circumstances, we failed to get permission to record the lessons, but we were at least allowed to observe a little with our own eyes.

What we were presented with was a scene of such spartan training it was hard to not sympathize with the child. Seeing such a display only reminded us that the world of high-class aristocracy does not maintain its image of luxury and effortless elegance without its own hardships.

Mrs. Rhyme taught students one after another, even after lunch.

"There just happened to be many clients who wanted a slot for today."

When we asked if she was always this busy, she responded to us with a calm expression betraying none of her fatigue.

"What does teaching mean to me? It's my responsibility as an aristocrat, I suppose. It is a fulfilling job, but...I'm not particularly doing it because I want to. I was once a child myself, and I am a parent. Do you think I would voluntarily make the children hate me?"

Apparently, it isn't rare for children to hate her or fear her because of her strict lessons.

"What child left the biggest impression on me so far? Excluding royalty, I would say perhaps Nia Liston. We carried out a recording of a lesson with her as the student, but there were many things I hadn't experienced in my long career as an etiquette teacher."

Things you'd never experienced?

"Yes. To start with, it was my first time on a recording. I had never shown a third party my tutoring before. Nia Liston was also the first child I had met who had been able to endure my lessons for so many hours. She was calm from start to finish, like no child I had ever known. When I unthinkingly said that to her, she said it was because she had already escaped death once before. That isn't a response you expect from a child, is it? I'm very glad she managed to recover from her illness."

Miss Nia Liston and Mrs. Rhyme's recording was the first ever episode of the Liston Channel's *Nia Liston's Occupation Observation*. Nowadays, it's quite rare to catch the episode on magivision as the need for rebroadcasts decreases.

And now we move on to dinner. This is where our true goal lies.

When Helena Rhyme thought back, she realized she had actually been quite nervous. Once she knew the recording would soon come to an end, she found herself greatly relieved.

Communicating with your presence and body language was a fundamental skill of an aristocrat. She refused to let her inner thoughts slip out and reveal her tension. This had been drilled into her as a child and was both the sword and shield that she wielded.

Now that she had become the teacher, it was a part of herself that she could

no longer cut off.

On the outside, she must have looked calm, but in reality, she was greatly nervous the whole time. Every move she made would remain recorded forever—both her failures and her successes. Knowing that any mistakes she made would be immortalized, there was no way she could afford any room for failure.

Though the courage and upkeep of appearances that was required in the aristocratic sphere was not all that different to what was required on magivision, standing in front of a camera made the differences apparent.

This was only her second time in a magivision recording. Helena was not used to it, so she'd had almost no time to relax. She headed to her dining room, and when she sat in her usual seat, her dinner was brought to her. After this meal, recording would be finished. Just thinking that almost made her relax, but now was when she had to be on her toes.

Because the ending was most important.

Hm?

But then she noticed it. Having tasted all manner of food and drink at aristocratic social gatherings, she could tell with a glance that something was off.

There was no problem with the wine. The passionate red color, the alluring aroma, the tartness that belied its youth—it was a fine wine. What was off were the appetizers that had been laid out in front of her. The vegetables were clumsily cut, and the presentation was messy and uncoordinated. A first-rate chef would obsess over even how the dressing was poured, because that was part of the coloring, part of what made up the dish.

What should I do?

Given their resident chef had been employed at their estate for years, Helena was keenly aware of their skill and the flavor of their meals. This had definitely been made by someone else and that someone else was an absolute beginner. The fact that the dish was presentable had to mean they'd had someone supervising them—were these made in their estate's kitchen, said supervisor would have been the resident chef. From the lack of reaction from the servants

around her, all of this had to have been set up.

It wasn't the work of some crooks trying to poison her at the very least. The resident cook would never entrust the kitchen to some inexperienced beginner under usual circumstances.

And that left one other option.

Could it perhaps be to do with that?

Magivision—if it was a secret recording being done in relation to that, then it created new possibilities for the situation. Maybe it was another one of Nia Liston's programs. Helena would sometimes watch her shows, and one of them involved her trying out various different occupations. Recently, the program of her racing dogs had been especially popular among the upper classes.

If she were honest, she didn't think very highly of the girl's work. It was not something that a child of an aristocratic family should be doing. It was unsightly. In no way was it the actions of a high-class aristocrat.

That said, they were in an age where such mindsets were now deemed old-fashioned.

The depressing passage of time aside, it seemed possible these appetizers could have been prepared by Nia Liston. She was making food for some program, and for some reason, Helena Rhyme had been chosen to be the person who would be served. She didn't know very much about how these programs worked, but she didn't think such a thing was out of the question, especially since the reality of the situation was that the food had in fact been served in front of her.

If that was the case, then it should only be natural that she make her complaints and tell the girl exactly what she'd done wrong. If Helena made herself the bad guy, then Nia's reputation would only improve. She was past the age of wanting to be seen as some kindly lady, so that was fine by her.

In that case... Wait.

Just as she was about to put her plan into motion, her instincts—which had been honed over the years by her ascent up the social ladder filled with those trying to drag others down—began raising alarm bells that it was too early to

make a decision.

"Another glass, please." She pretended to carefully consider the wine to buy herself some time.

Was it not possible that the strange chef was *not* Nia Liston? Saying her honest thoughts to Nia was absolutely no problem. However, that wasn't something she should do to anyone else.

What if it turned out to be Hildetaura, for instance? The princess often appeared on magivision herself. The possibility was there.

This recording was unusual, in general. From the moment her husband brought it to her attention, it had already been strange. Jaurès hated this kind of frivolous program that dug into people's private lives. He was much harsher than Helena in this respect.

The result of the recording with Nia Liston hadn't been negative, but Jaurès had been against it from the start. He'd only approved of it because Helena had been insistent on letting it happen. But what if Jaurès felt pressured to take on this recording from a political standpoint because it was from Hildetaura? Thinking of it that way, it made much more sense to assume it was the princess over Nia.

There was no way she could openly disparage a member of the royal family on a magivision program being watched by an indeterminate number of people; it would mean she was practically rejecting her aristocrat status.

But then what if it was Reliared Silver? That one seemed more unlikely. They'd never met face-to-face, so it was hard to imagine she had approached them. Besides, she'd heard the Silvers were busy with their paper plays. They didn't have the time to be doing some strange recording that involved making food for a third-class aristocrat.

In which case...

"Has the chef changed? The food is a little different than usual." She would appeal to the audience by making it clear that she could detect the difference but avoid saying anything more so she would be able to adjust depending on whether it was Nia or Hildetaura.

Helena Rhyme took her time elegantly savoring the meal. Had her judgment been correct?

"My name is Hildetaura! And this is my new program, Cooking Princess!"

Half a day earlier, while Helena Rhyme had been doing her recording showing off her tutoring, Hildetaura, dressed up in a cute pink apron and chef's hat, was doing some secret recording in the kitchen.

"Girls nowadays wish to have at least one dish they are a master of, even royalty. In this program, I will learn how to cook from a professional chef, then give it a shot myself. Let's aim for the taste of a pro that would make even an aristocrat groan in delight!"

Her enthusiastic clenching of her fist was very cute.



"Now to introduce our chef— Oh, but before that. If you're someone around my age, make sure you cook with an adult! That's what I'm doing! Now, our chef is this wonderful guest here!"

Helena Rhyme had predicted correctly. As for why this project had been brought to them, well, it was because Jaurès had predicted *in*correctly. He had very rudely insulted Hildetaura's cooking while the magivision cameras were rolling, with no way to hide the evidence of his blunder. He'd said all manner of horrible words about the food, and there was no taking that back.

Hildetaura had managed to get Jaurès to accept this proposal of a do-over under the condition that she never let that recording come to light. But Jaurès also introduced a sacrifice to take the fall for him... No, he made his wife pay the price for his mistake. That was the truth of the matter.

But that behind-the-scenes drama aside, that program—in which professional chefs revealed some of their recipes—had an effect on not just dining establishments but also home cooking, ultimately leading to the improvement in the overall cooking skill of the citizens of Altoire. Eventually reigning as a long-running program, it became so famous that it inspired many cooking competitions aimed at beginners.

The sneaky recording of aristocrats—this was the moment that such a culture was truly born. Would it be considered an evil trend or something that would aid in the spread of magivision? Later cultural scholars were unable to draw any conclusions, but if there was one thing they could say for certain...

It was this that greatly changed Nia Liston's fate.

That was one truth that everyone could acknowledge.

Epilogue

"We can finally relax."

"Indeed."

Early in the morning following that eventful night, we had safely boarded the high-speed liner back to Altoire. It had been early enough that the sky was still dark, but...there had been an unusually large number of people all the way from the hotel to the port. Some had looked like adventurers, others had been in military gear, and others had looked like they belonged to the underworld.

They had begun moving the moment they saw Lynokis come out of the hotel, so they must have been waiting for Leeno. We had been able to outrun them though.

A foreign adventurer had raised krams in the hundred millions in just a few days, an adventurer who completely pulverized infamous monsters that the locals had long struggled against, and an adventurer whom those with a sharp ear for rumors might have at least heard the name of.

That was the image we had built of Leeno in Vanderouge, and that meant that we'd managed to sell her name as I'd hoped. *Wonderful, wonderful.* Thanks to that though, we deemed it too dangerous to do any further work in Vanderouge so we quickly made our leave. Since Cedony had managed to prepare the high-speed liner for us, we could get back in half a day, but we were afraid we'd have our cover blown with all the attention, so we decided to stop our adventure there. We'd just had that attack yesterday, after all.

"We managed to meet our target, but it was certainly tough, Young Mistress."

Yes, but...

"Hold on a little longer," I whispered.

Catching on, the personal attendant Lynokis looked at me as Leeno the adventurer and said, "Ah, of course." We had to continue this charade until we returned to Altoire, at least whenever we were in a space we couldn't

guarantee we had privacy—that was why I had redyed my hair.

"Leeno! Good work again on this expedition!" Tork Cedony said, grin wide as he came out of the back. "Thank you very much for fulfilling every last one of my orders! We've made quite the profit thanks to you!"

With how happy he looked, he must have earned more than he'd expected. No wonder his grin was so wide.

I gazed out the window while Lynokis dealt with him.

The cityscape of Vanderouge stretched out beneath us. It was too dark to see clearly, but looking at it from above made it very apparent how big the place really was. Is that the castle? What about over there? I wonder if that's a famous location.

Our expedition this time had been filled with nothing but hunting. We hadn't even been able to walk outside normally, never mind go sightseeing. The sole exception was when we'd gone to visit the Huskitans. I hadn't even had the time to go see the airships like my parents had told me to.

I hoped the next time I came here, I could have a more relaxing time. I was leaving the country without even learning what the appeal of the land was.

"Beginning acceleration: three, two, one... Ignition."

After reaching an appropriate altitude, the high-speed liner blasted off—it was as frighteningly fast as ever. I really would love an airship like this, but it would definitely be an impossible ask...

We were scheduled to arrive in Altoire somewhere between evening and night. The third semester of my school life was about to begin. Winter vacation would come to an end, our adventure had been successful, I'd somehow finished my winter homework, and the name of Leeno the adventurer had spread round Vanderouge. Everything had pretty much gone as planned.

But there was one thing left to do.

"Please enjoy the rest of your trip."

I waited until their conversation had finished, and I then left with Lynokis. We both entered a small room, and it was then that we could finally relax.

"Even I'm quite exhausted," I admitted. These past few days had been so frantic. The hunts themselves were fun so I didn't mind so much, but now that we had the chance to just sit down and relax, I could feel the fatigue that had built up in my body.

"I was certain I'd put together a schedule that wasn't too tough, but yes, it was exhausting. At least we managed to cross the hundred-million-kram mark, so I do think it was worth the effort. Now, Young Mistress, about last night..."

"I know."

We still hadn't discussed those events. Lynokis had made it back safely, so I'd seen no urgency to discuss it at the time. I'd promised her that we could talk about it on the flight back to Altoire since it would serve as a nice way to kill time.

Now then, about what the hell that raid was and why Leeno had been called out... I'd infiltrated their base without really knowing what was going on, and I'd done it so sneakily, I'd never received any answers while I was there, so I'd been pretty curious.

What kind of story will I get to hear today?

Afterword

My game backlog has only gotten worse.

Hello, Umikaze Minamino here.

I'm writing this afterword at the end of October 2023. It's about the time you can't help wondering if the end of the year is in sight. This book will probably end up on shelves sometime this winter.

It's the fourth volume. Finally, we've made it to the fourth volume. If you think about it like *Final Fantasy*, that means it's like *Final Fantasy IV*—the one where you go all the way to the moon. Surely I'm not the only person who thought Dark Knight was cooler than Paladin. It's an absolute classic. It was made back when they were still SquareSoft, before they'd become the Square Enix we know today. It was released on the super console known as the Super Nintendo. Nowadays, it's been remade and ported to various consoles, so do try it out if you haven't already!

Also, make sure you read this book that is pretty much FFIV!

Ah, have you already read it? Then look forward to the next manga volume instead!

This time, we had a lot of fight scenes. There were a lot of drafts because I kept messing up. Did you notice the book's a little thicker than usual? No? You read it as an ebook so you didn't notice? You don't care? I see.

Well, just believe me when I say it is. Ah, don't worry. Everyone's beloved Bendelio got to do something in this volume too!

Katana Canata-sensei, thank you for your beautiful illustrations. Nia looks very nice with black hair. There must have been challenges due to you having to swap halfway through. Also, I think Nia with black hair looks good. You may be a little disoriented with all the young girls and fighting scenes and other unique tropes, but Nia with black hair is very good, so I'm looking forward to more of your art.

Kodai-sensei, thank you for always making the manga releases a ton of fun. At the time of me writing this, volume 3 has yet to be released. I'm excited for it. I'm really excited for it! Personally, I think it's way more fun than my novels, so definitely check it out! Incidentally, apparently the correct way to read their name is Kabuto Kodai, not Kou Kodai. It gave me quite the shock. Excuse me for misreading it.

To my editor, S-san, thank you for all your help again. There really were a lot of drafts this time, so thank you for all of your insight. It was thanks to you that my final work ended up being more polished. As in, I'm pretty sure it became ninety-five percent more polished. It's crazy.

To everyone else who works on getting my books out there, thank you very much.

Finally, to my readers. It's thanks to all of you that this fourth volume could come to be. Just between you and me, I've heard that the digital versions are *really* selling. You're all buying the digital versions. Are you the poster children of digital versions? Nice to see you!

It's thanks to all of you, whether you buy the digital or the physical versions, that I was able to release this fourth volume. I feel nothing but the utmost gratitude. Truly, thank you so much.

Also, it seems we'll be able to release a fifth volume as well. That's five whole volumes. If you think about it like *Monster Hunter*, this would be the *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* of Nia Liston. I'm surprised at how many *MonHun* games have come out. *MonHun* is an incredible game series.

In any case, let's meet again in the next volume!

Bonus Short Stories

Merchandise

"Welcome back, Young Mistress Nia."

When I returned to my dorm room, my brother's personal attendant, Lynette, was enjoying some tea and watching magivision as she waited for me. Lynokis was currently out adventuring, so Lynette was helping take care of me—all while also taking care of my brother.

"You can stay where you are, it's okay," I reassured her, placing my bag down as she frantically went to stand. There was nothing wrong with her taking a break.

She had been watching *The Red Knight Chronicles: Founding the Kingdom*, one of the Silvers' paper plays that was all the rage at the academy right now. After *A Founding History of Altoire*, their first play, went down exceedingly well, they had immediately moved on to their second. It was a hero's legacy following the Red Knight Soma, known in history for his contributions to the founding of Altoire.

I sighed. "No matter where I go, it's all I hear about."

The Red Knight Chronicles had become the center of attention in all manner of ways—kids playing pretend, gushing over how cool or cute they found the cast, or making their own speculations about the story, and teachers pointing out all the historical inaccuracies... I had no doubt in my mind it was popular down in the castle town as well.

"Well, it is very interesting."

I wouldn't deny that. I couldn't, in fact. Not when I was so invested in how the story progressed a little more each day myself.

I wouldn't deny it, and I understood why it was all everyone could talk about, but it was also hard to deny that, as someone in the industry, I felt frustrated

seeing nothing but the paper plays all the time. The popularity of the Silver Channel was through the roof, while the royal capital and the Liston territories were being left behind. Who would expect me to be happy about that?

"Brother quite enjoys it as well, doesn't he?" I asked, sitting myself down at the table. Lynette began to pour a cup of tea for me.

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"Yes, he's always looking forward to it."

If he did, then...

"Take these."

"Excuse me?"
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"Relia keeps shoving merch on me recently." With the popularity of the paper plays, the Silvers had been developing items related to the program. Reliared would so smugly talk about it while so smugly handing the merchandise over to me. I took a piece out of my bag and laid it on the table.

I didn't dislike the show, so if I had been a child myself, I would probably have loved these. Reliared would be happier having these go to my brother rather than myself anyway.

"Um... May I inquire as to what this is exactly?"

"A wooden carved plate." It was a very small rectangular plate with the name "Red Knight Soma" engraved on it. Maybe you could use it as a saucer? But it was small and long and all bumpy—no way the cup would sit on it without wobbling. No, it was purely ornamental.

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"Take this too."

"And what is this?"

"A wooden pen carved in the shape of the Red Knight's sword."

"Oh, something practical this time."
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It would be a little more accurate to describe it as a pen *body*. Its shape wasn't the most conducive to writing, but you could certainly use it if you tried. Apparently, you had to buy the nibs separately, but I had no idea why you would go to all the effort for one like this.

"She gave me this as well."

"I'm not sure what this is either... At the very least, I can tell it's a helmet."

"Yes, it's carved in the shape of the Red Knight's. This one is nothing more than an ornament."

Reliared had tried to convince me that since fans weren't looking for practicality from merchandise, this type of merch meant purely for display was perfectly fine.

"What a waste of the craftsman's talent..." Lynette groaned to herself as she picked up the helmet to take a closer look.

"I hear the artisans have been putting their all into it. Relia was telling me about how this sort of good that is for display rather than practical use is perfect as practice for apprentices or jobs for older craftsmen who no longer work as they used to."

Reliared had been very smug as she'd told me about this too.

"I'm jealous of them, honestly," I continued. "What a way to keep your economy booming."

"Ah, on the topic, I remember the young master saying he really wanted the wooden doll of the Red Knight."

"Oh yes, they do have something like that, but Relia won't give me one."

If she did, I'd immediately give it to Neal.

"It's not the most suited to carrying around, is it? It likely couldn't fit into her bag."

"That would make sense."

I hated the idea of asking her for it myself, so unfortunately, Neal would have to wait until they were back in stores.

A wooden doll of the Red Knight... I kind of want one myself. Just a little.

A Hunt Going Smoothly Awry

"What will we do, Young Mistress?" Lynokis asked.

"Simply remain here," I responded, picking up a rock off the ground.

Deep within a forest, not far from where we stood, was a large beautiful deer with a single horn. It was a monster known as a sword deer.

We were maintaining our distance so it wouldn't discover us, but...given wild animals—and especially herbivores—had exceptional senses, it might have already noticed us. The only reason it hadn't already dashed away was because we hadn't gotten so close it deemed us a danger yet.

The vigilance of wildlife was not to be underestimated; it was the main thing keeping them alive in this world of survival of the fittest.

"Why a rock?"

"I'm going to throw it." This was more than enough for small to medium monsters. Using external chi or running after it were both viable options, but this expedition was a race against time. The goal here was to be as efficient as possible.

This was our first day on our Vanderouge expedition and the first island we'd visited on our hunt. As luck would have it, we'd discovered one of our targets immediately upon entering the forest. Hopefully, things would continue going as smoothly as this—and that meant no playing around.

"Take this!"

The stone I threw shot through the trees and the shrubbery and landed a direct hit on the deer's neck. We were close enough to hear the loud smack as it hit its target and the deer fell to the ground.

"Whoa... How did you make it go so fast?"

"Inner chi. I just heightened it before I threw. Anyway, let's hurry and retrieve it."

"Y-Yes, Young Mistress. But, um, how? Carry it back to the ship? No, that would be really inefficient..."

Lynokis looked strangely rattled for some reason.

Ah, she did say that sword deer are pretty hard to take down and are dangerous because of how sharp their horns are. They have a tendency to flee very easily. As someone who had studied as an adventurer, Lynokis might have been shocked to see such a style of hunting that didn't match with her knowledge.

"The plan is to keep up the pace with our hunting, so let's gather all the carcasses here for now. We can return to the port later and request a cargo skiff."

"Good point. I'll go gather them then."

Now for the next—

"Young Mistreeess! Heeeelp!"

What should have been a simple retrieval job had turned into Lynokis rushing out of the nearby trees carrying the deer on her back.

Bring back a souvenir, did she? Right on Lynokis's heels were several small doglike monsters. They hadn't been in our plans, but no harm in hunting them too.

"I-It's so cold..."

It was winter so everywhere was cold, but this island was especially so. Dark gray clouds were hanging over the island and there was quite the amount of snow falling. Apparently, winters on this island were always bad. Visibility was poor but there was nothing I could do about that. We could make up a schedule for our hunts, but we couldn't bend the weather to our will. I'd deal with it.

"Let's be quick then," I said to the shivering Lynokis, as we charged into the blizzard.

The snow was thick enough that we chose to travel with a skiff—going on foot would be both time-consuming and exhausting. For Lynokis, I mean. Snow was nothing to me. Though even that aside, the skiff came with a cargo bed so it was convenient for transporting our hunts.

Our main target on this island was the snow tigers. They were said to be

monsters that traveled with the snow.

What if the blizzards are caused by the snow tigers? There were monsters that could use magic, after all.

No, no, what am I thinking? That's impossible. It was much more natural to assume that the bad weather was due to the climate changes that had accompanied the Great Float. Probably.

We soared through the white sky, snow battering us as we went. I focused my eyes completely on the forest below...and then caught sight of our target.

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"Found it."

"What?"

"I'll be back in a moment."

"Hang on?!"
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I leaped from the skiff without waiting for a response from Lynokis. The tiger that had been dashing through the forest turned its head up when it sensed my rapid descent.

"Impressive."

To sense me through a blizzard even while I was dampening my presence was not an easy feat. This snow tiger was stronger than I thought—compared to a normal tiger, at least. But a tiger was still just a tiger.

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"Too easy."
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After realizing what I was, the snow tiger lowered its body and slashed with its front claws. I weaved between its legs and countered with a kick to the head. With a crunch, its skull broke, and the snow tiger crumpled to the ground.

"Y-Young Mistress! Where are you?!" I faintly heard Lynokis's voice shouting from among the raging wintry winds. She was flying around the area after having lost sight of me.

"I'm here! She can't hear me, huh..."

I tried to shout, but there was no way it reached her. This back-and-forth was annoying enough that I simply pulled the corpse of the snow tiger onto my back

and dashed up the nearby trees.

How many more did we need to hunt again?

"Why are you so relaxed?!"

"Huh?"

Where did this come from? I'd gone into a private cabin with Lynokis while on the way to our next destination so we could have a quick meeting, and she'd immediately yelled at me.

"You're not even tense! You're hunting everything way too fast! There's nothing for me to do! I'm the one who graduated from the Department of Adventuring yet I'm not even needed here!"

Why was she so angry?

"But we're managing our hunt according to plan, aren't we?" We'd built our schedule knowing we could hunt that fast. So far, we'd strictly adhered to our allotted time per island—in fact, I was pretty sure we were *ahead* of time a little. We were going at a good pace.

"It's according to plan but it's also not!"

Is... Is this meant to be a riddle?

"I thought you'd rely on me more! Struggle on this adventure! Hesitate while you hunt! The plan was to have you see me in a new light as an adventuring graduate! But this isn't going according to plan at all!" Lynokis vehemently spat out.

That was much more like a desire than a plan.

"Now don't be so unreasonable. We don't have the time to be struggling or hesitating, do we?"

Our end goal was one billion krams. We didn't have so much leeway we could mess around. I wouldn't be able to come up with a reason to struggle or hesitate in the first place.

"I know! But you're wrong! That's not what I mean!"

If that wasn't what she meant, then what she did mean was flying right over my head. Why was she so complicated to deal with?

"Why not take a break and calm down?"

We had a bit of time until we reached the next island. Physical stamina was one thing, but being pressed for time wore away at your mental stamina as well. Taking the time to rest in these little moments could make all the difference.

"Do you mean we can cosleep?!"

Why is that her conclusion?

When I bluntly refused her, she once more shouted, "This wasn't the plan!" She was starting to get unreasonable, so I decided to leave her alone.



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Nia Liston: The Merciless Maiden Volume 4

by Umikaze Minamino

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